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SCREEN STAR

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BY JACK PRESTON

Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc. 1932
Garden City New York

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

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FIRST EDITION

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To Lois

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A GREAT MANY *Hollywood and motion picture people move through the pages of this book in their right names and characters. They are mentioned in all good faith, sometimes in friendship, often in admiration, never with intent to injure. They form a part of the factual background of the purely fictional story of Lira Morgan. All of the main characters of the story and several minor ones are fictional and are not based on any living person. In no case is a real person disguised by a fictitious name. Where any character appears under a name of my invention he, or she, is fictitious, based entirely upon my general knowledge and experience of the motion picture world.*

JACK PRESTON.

SCREEN STAR

. . . THIS IS THE STORY of a real girl in the unreal profession of pictures. If it is ever published, which heaven forbid unless the royalties are good, although it is neither libelous nor sensational, I may have to leave town.

I? A writer in the same racket, God help me. And if for a long time I have wanted to put Lira Morgan in a book it may be in part to atone for some of the literary atrocities in which I have had a hand.

My plan is simply to follow her from this moment on, allowing her to furnish what facts she will about herself up to now. I am impelled to this labor by recent observations of her. She has reached a point in pictures with which all stars and near-stars are painfully familiar: the boiling point. Something is bound to happen around her before long, and whatever it is, the chances are it will be as interesting as she is.

Lira has blue-black hair, blue-green eyes, and a salary at present of eight hundred a week. Her skin has provoked soap merchants to constant solicitations over a period of years. She humored one of them once, and has had cartons of soap to give away ever since. I have myself collected eight of them. . . . Her lithe, five-foot-

six figure has demoralized male fans all the way from Alaska to Africa. Lira's movements have been compared to a panther's, but this may be neither here nor there, as probably few reviewers have ever seen a panther. She has the prettiest of ears, admittedly a touchy point, and shapely hands and feet. In a word, she is a beauty. With all this, I'm not sure that her walk isn't the most alluring thing about her. When she starts to cross a set you hold your breath till she stops.

But, eliminating tiresome third-person descriptions, let this divine concoction of Welsh, Irish, and Scotch, raised on a ranch in the North, and ruined (as she says) on a lot in the South, come forward herself and say a few things by way of introduction. . . .

. . . Herb Berkman got me in silent pictures. That was six years ago—I was just nineteen. Mother told me to be nice to him, that she knew he'd work for me. Herb was in the art department at Paramo-Mayer's and didn't even wait for the first kiss before going to the bat for me. He got me a test and got his kiss.

Herb had beautiful eyes, soft and tender, like a woman's. He was an inch shorter than I was, but though fine of feature he wasn't effeminate, and I haven't met many gentiles who understood and respected women as he did.

From the age of fourteen on, there had been romances for me, of course, but I had never been in love—I

haven't even yet—and wasn't with Herb. I kissed him that night merely as though he were a leading man, but it was just my luck when it took. He said he was mad about me. I started to tell him I never could feel that way, when Mother came in. She deliberately broke up the party and let Herb go home uncertain. That's the way she made me keep him, too, for months—until I was known in the studio as something besides "Herb Berkman's girl-friend."

He wrote to me week after week and drew sketches of me. I was posing for him one afternoon, and was so sleepy I didn't realize that one of my shoulder straps had parted, revealing too much of my anatomy. Herb shouted, "Lira!" and I thought the place was on fire. His face was red, and he looked as though he were going to cry.

Up to then I hadn't quite realized he was so much—you know—of a man. His hands trembled as he drew me into a close-up, and I was almost frightened. He said: "You're killing me!" Men are funny, aren't they? He proposed to me again for the fiftieth time, and I again told him how much I liked him as a friend. He got awfully pale, but didn't answer, and while I was fastening my shoulder strap he disappeared, and I didn't see him till next day.

Things went along like that for a few weeks more, and I began to see what I've so often seen since—that no one can get anyone else in pictures without a

real, personal sacrifice. Picture studios are something like those native temples on the Congo, aren't they? Someone has to be sacrificed—there has to be blood—before you can enter. It was that way with Herb and me. My director had been awfully nice at first, but one day, while showing me how to do a clinch, he kissed me and whispered something to me. Herb was on the set and saw me blush, and although he didn't say anything I noticed a dirty look pass between him and the director. From that day they had it in for each other, and in the final play of studio politics Herb lost out. I would have, too, if the production manager, Esau Goldbein, hadn't thought he could get somewhere with me now that Herb was out.

Mother warned me, whatever I did, not to let Herb know I thought his getting me in had had anything to do with his losing out. So I pretended to be dumb, though it worried me to see the queer, sort of smiling and yet bitter expression in his eyes as he said good-bye that night. . . . I never saw him again. They say he went to Australia. . . .

Jack, what is it that always makes men act that way around me?

> "It's a law of physics. Nothing has the devastating drawing-power of a vacuum. Take a tornado——"

Be yourself. Tell me—please—Have *you* ever felt it?

"My dear, it's the maddening vibration caused by your knees rubbing together when you walk. They're too round."

Jackdaw! . . . Still, if you were romantic around me I couldn't tell you everything, could I?

"No." . . . (And to myself: "The printing presses must go on.")

You know, in view of all that's happened since—Tony—and all that—I sometimes wish I had tried to make myself care for Herb. He would soon have gone, anyway, when he found there was nothing to it; but he'd have had something to take away with him, something he did seem to want terribly.

"Your virtue, I take it."

Yes; but you don't take it. Tony attended to that. . .

. . . Lira is no wisecracker. Still, I reflect, she said that with a smile. She isn't hard, either. Just a mystery. . . . I wish a real love-story would take shape around her. It would be a joy to tell about it, even for a fellow sick and tired of putting down words on paper. . .

. . . When I brought my freckled and—as my press agents say, piquant—face to Hollywood, I really didn't have much hope of landing inside a studio. Mother, though, kept assuring me I would, as she still keeps assuring me I'll soon be at the peak. When I did get in,

though, I felt a thrill I still often feel when the gateman touches his hat to me. I've had to swim in icy water when ill and fall in vats of oil; I've stood on my feet all night and on my head after passing out in the morning; I've hated directors so sincerely I've gotten seasick at a dinner in their presence; I've lain down at night and wished that either Mother or myself would be dead in the morning. But Mother and the directors and the oil tanks and I are still here, so I guess I've finally learned to give up every other dream except that of success. It would seem like mere vanity for me to like the admiration of studio people and the public, wouldn't it? But the gateman, the executives, the mechanics on the set, and the applauding audiences—these are what I've had to accept in place of love—until now I'm not sure that I don't prefer them to any lover. I often say I'd give them up for the right man, but would I really do it, and is there any such thing as a right man?

I was around nineteen when this fame business began to happen to me, so I know pretty well how it feels to be just one more attractive girl. Occasionally, perhaps, someone turns and looks at you on the street—or you may get a chance to recite a ballad at a bridge party. Then—a hundred days when nothing even as exciting as that happens. A bank manager or a lawyer or a minister's son writes you love letters. You go out with him and come home again. He keeps hold of your hand. You let him kiss you, and he tastes like a mixture of

buttermilk and tobacco. It all seems so silly. You hate it. But now—here in Hollywood. Every hour someone of more or less importance is on your trail. You daren't answer the phone. You feel like somebody. When you go out shopping or to the theater you pull your hat down over your eyes to disguise yourself, to keep admiring men and women and girls from crowding around you. Often while your car is waiting at an intersection for the signal you hear voices whisper: "Look—that's Lira Morgan!" When you go to a première, no matter who the star of the picture, your own rags glitter and rattle in the lobby as beautifully as any, and the radio announcer drags you to the microphone in spite of yourself—even in spite of your mother. Haw-haw. But when it's *your* picture—the mob begins to shout before you ever step out of your tonneau—the human wall parts, cameras click all around you, flowers are tossed under your feet, a double line of black-and-white male evening wear opens as far ahead as the ticket office, and the uniformed ushers are bent double as you make your entrance. Intermission comes, with a full hand, and you find yourself the center of a group speaking all accents. Some make you sick, but there are others whose opinions mean everything, and when they take your hands and offer sincere congratulations from one artist to another, your head swims, and all the other things in life seem far away and unimportant.

The morning after, it is different. The salute of the

gateman is so insignificant after the roar of the première and the party afterwards, that you wonder if things are as real as they seem in this picture world. The sound-stage is stuffy, and your head throbs when the camera-man calls: "Light 'em all." You feel in advance the fatigue of five o'clock and move off in the wings to be alone. You sit on some old couch in an adjoining "interior" and smoke a cigarette. You happen to glance at your manicured, lacquered nails, and they surprise you, for you had drifted off to a ranch away up north and were sitting in the cottonwoods, dreaming of a young cowboy who once stopped at your ranch overnight and never came back. In those days you used to whittle with a big jackknife, and fingernails were usually edged in black.

> "Lira, you can't tell me that you've lived to be twenty-five and kissed a regiment of good-looking leading men, without once falling in love."

Oh, I've lost my head now and then, for a few days or even weeks, but aside from Tony Devereaux I never did anything foolish. I don't mind telling you that Tony hit me pretty hard for about a year. Since then I've been surer than ever that I'll never find the impossible ideal I thought I knew at sixteen. He was grand, I must admit, but of course he—just wasn't. About a year ago, after the agony with Tony had died down to an occasional headache, George Dareos, the Ocean Park

psychic, told me I had received a letter from a man in Canada who was going to play a big part in my life. My secretary went through a stack of fan mail, and sure enough there was a letter from up in Alberta somewhere —not even signed—just a post-office box number. It sounded real thrilling and had some cute verses in it—but he never showed up. Of course, I couldn't answer it, or he'd have been down here looking for a job as my chauffeur or leading man or something—but I did have the studio send him a photograph, and I honored him by memorizing a couple of his verses. One of them ran something like this:

"*If I saw you too near*
You'd haunt me too long,
I'll worship from here
And sing you a song,
And stay where I fear
I'll always belong."

Sort of independent, don't you think? I kind of liked it. When I get fed up with actors and other people who push themselves all over the place, I sometimes wonder what this person would have been like if I'd given him a chance. But then I don't pay any attention to fortune tellers—they've missed it with me so many times. Besides, I've had romantic letters from all over the world. Men love to write them, whether they mean what they say or not. I don't believe there is perfect love anywhere,

or anything like it. I almost did when Tony first came along.

He had made a rapid rise in silent pictures and was idolized by every mother and her daughter. You know what a good-looking fellow he is. Tall, with square shoulders, almost too handsome for a man; and with hypnotic eyes which are also rather insolent. I had watched him on the set, taking the various women as a matter of course—sometimes bigger names than mine. Then he was introduced to me, and I could see that he intended to do no further acting that day. He speaks seven languages, and he made love to me in a different one every day. I had never seen it done that way before. I was getting fine parts myself by now, and sailing right ahead, but my success didn't seem to impress him a bit. Later, I found out that I was mistaken. He simply knew by instinct how to take me. Of course, there was indifference in him toward everything—everything except one terrible thing I didn't know about for a long time.

The day he met Mother and realized that she would hate any man who tried to marry me away from a career Tony began to talk about marriage. He seemed so much in earnest that I was persuaded to mention it at home. Then the feud began. We had scene after scene, Mother and I, and often didn't speak for days. I look back on that year as the most miserable time of my life.

As long as I was earning all the money, and we spent plenty, too, as we do yet, I felt that I had a few rights,

so I began meeting Tony odd places, and after a decent interval one night went with him to his bachelor apartment. I hardly know yet how he did it, but soon he had me agreeing to an elopement which changed in another hour or so to a temporary companionate marriage—because of our jobs—and before I knew it we were man and wife.

There was a catch to it, though, as I began to realize next morning. He believed more in "companionship" than in marriage certificates and old-fashioned blessings. But he had such a good alibi I excused him. Both of our contracts read that no marriage should be undertaken without the consent of the studio, and then had to be carried through in secret. Besides that, there was Mother's bitter opposition.

We lived, or I should say I did, in a fool's paradise for several weeks, seeing each other anywhere we could. I tried to stay away from his apartment as much as possible.

Still, in spite of all our precautions, Mother seemed to sense that something had happened, and did it make her temperamental! We hit high C every time we got into a friendly argument on any subject, and cried and screamed around the house until each of us thought the other was crazy, and the neighbors must have thought we both were. I often enough wished I had never seen a camera or a big salary check or that I was dead and buried.

One night, after twelve, Tony brought me home from the theatre and left before Mother arrived. We had such a battle after she came home that I walked out on her and went to Tony's apartment, unannounced. . . . I found him there . . . with a boy-friend.

"Damn this town anyway. I hate to see an actress cry in earnest. It doesn't seem fair. . . ."

Oh, well, Jack, it's all coming to us, I suppose, or it wouldn't happen. There are times when you feel that it didn't matter—that nothing does matter. One good thing about a shock is that it leaves you numb for awhile—maybe more or less numb forever, I don't know.

Yes, I've seen him since. There wan't a ripple in it. Just sort of sick. I guess it hurt his pride pretty badly. They tell me he wore an injured air for a long while. His studio let him out about that time, on account of the things they had learned, but when the talkies came in the need for actors who could speak foreign languages was so great, he got connected once more. . . . I suppose they can't help it—I don't know. It was horrible though.

Since that experience I've looked on life differently I guess. Men aren't the same to me. I don't trust them. Dozens of them pursue me all the time—everything from millionaire doctors to fifty-dollar artists. There's something wrong with all of them. I often sit by on a

set and watch the men—executives, directors, actors, and mechanical workers. Once in a while one of them will seem alive and real—but he's always an electrician or an assistant property man, or a grip. The men who seem most like real ones have no job and no future. They might have somewhere else, but not in Hollywood and not in a studio. The fact that they're here goes against them, even if a normally ambitious person could fall in love with one of them—which probably isn't likely, if you spent a few hours alone with them.

There are hundreds of really superior women in the picture business. Many of them are making a real success. Where are they to find men? To work with the average actor on one picture is enough to decide you against actors. . . . Mirrors, baths, bootleg stimulants—what I did, what I said—my career—my public—my press agent—my critics . . . And then the production heads—just let a pudgy producer manhandle you two minutes and feel the female devils coming to life inside of you. The nice writers are all married and have alimony to pay besides. The retired daddies who hang around Hollywood because pretty women are here in numbers are the most disgusting of all. So again it comes back to the boys who lift cameras and set up sound equipment. But you daren't go around with any of them because they're not received in your crowd, and as for falling in love or marrying one of them—even supposing you lived through a few weeks alone with him—how

could you be sure he wasn't just hitching his Ford to a star?

I sometimes wonder if the trouble isn't inside of me. If an honest, real man came along and wanted me just for me, would I have sense enough to know it? Or has my hectic, artificial life already made me so I couldn't recognize him? . . .

I guess I've painted Mother pretty black, but I do think she's beginning to worry a little about the daughter as well as the actress. Now and then she asks me if I don't think so-and-so would be a pretty good husband. They usually have both money and position, of course—but then, if Mother weren't like that, I suppose I'd never have had the boost necessary to put me over.

I know one thing—the day's going to come when I'll get fed up all at once—and then I hate to think what may happen. There probably won't be a man in it, but if there is, it will be bad for him too. . . .

. . . I knew Lira would come to this in due course, but didn't expect the confession so soon. . . .

. . . As I look back on the Lira Morgan of six years ago I see a creature entirely different from what I've become. I had dreams, of course, but I didn't crave something all the time and have this vague hunger that now costs me so much in cigarettes. Queer that the pictures have to do this to you—it's happened to every girl I

know, in different degrees. Some go the limit and fade out. Others hang on a long time. But none of them are happy. What I mean by happiness is that sweet emotion of the soul which Garbo says we should only talk about in a whisper for fear it will vanish. I thought I had it with Tony—but I guess if you really did have it, you'd be free from doubt, which I wasn't.

It isn't so very long ago since I told you I could never be happy away from this racket now. That was just after one of my premières. The last story they've given me is the most insipid mess I've ever read. Honest, it's enough to ruin me. I told them I wouldn't do it and went home on them. They claim to be rewriting it now, but you know what that means. When the original idea is sappy, the more you stir it up the worse it is. If ever I'm fool enough to sign another contract I'll make mighty sure I have some say about stories.

But coming back to love—it's nice to talk about, anyway. We all claim our lives are full with our "art," but we're all liars. The Tony affair left a lot of hatred in me for men, but the funny part of it is that the less I think of them, the more I think of love. It's fantastic that love should have anything to do with men—at least, the ones I've known. Queer the brutes find it so easy to want us, isn't it? You're a man—maybe you can explain that—no, don't bother. What they feel isn't love. In all the crowd I never met one who knew—except possibly Paul.

"Perhaps you're one of the few girls, after all, for whom there is a right one who *will* know?"

How we all love to think that! But who ever saw the miracle and lived? . . .

. . . To see Lira Morgan among a group of the Hollywood wise, to hear her countering the subtly vulgar witticisms of glib featherweights, you'd hardly expect her ever to yearn for the simple life. If anyone seems wise-and-wary enough to be fitted for this medieval joust known as the Movies, Lira does. But it must not be forgotten that until she was fifteen she rode the range on a ragged pinto pony and brought home sage chickens with a shotgun. True, her mother made her go to town twice a week and give recitations before circles of ladies, and later she moved there, but when a spirit as free as this has watched the changing colors of the foothills through fifteen Octobers, it is likely to take more than hairdressers, masseurs, and messieurs completely to remove nature's imprint from a romantic imagination. Of course, you have to consider that Lira will never be older than fifteen. When she finds a part in a play exactly to her taste she recites the lines to everybody, rises dramatically to the various climaxes, if any, and acts all over the place. Any half-human character can make her weep, and when she laughs at a piece of business you wish you were the author of it.

One of the many unusual things about her is that she

seldom talks about clothes. But neither does she talk about her beauty. Both she takes for granted. It would seem as though she were born to this life of make-believe, where a queen wears her robes as the ordinary girl does a house dress. Just what the result would be if she awoke some morning on a ranch and discovered, in the house dress, that the past six years had been a dream is an interesting speculation . . . skip most likely down through the cottonwoods, *au naturel*, make a hasty covering of leaves, and perhaps join the other nymphs which sheep herders have so often seen along the banks of the Powder River.

The scene is the dining room at the Artificers' League.

Walter King, a fat writer and associate producer, occupies the head of the table. Another director, Chumb Henderson, distinguished by infinitesimal ears, is next at right, omitting mention of the three-tone blonde between them. Lira and myself are at King's left. Beside me sits Gay Kelter, a fuming sexagon of forty, who feasts on her own erotic concoctions because she can't find anything else that will satisfy. A pale, plot-weary novelist-gone-sour, Oscar Peed, maintains a fairly good smoke screen against Gay's and sits thinking alternately of his wife's latest cross-complaint and a brunette mouth directly opposite him. Dougald Scott, an egotist, who finally got himself yessed to death as an actor-producer, forms a nice threesome with John

Green, the struttingest wassailer since John Wilkes Booth, and Moll Kruller, an antique of fifty-five who still sells herself on a fairy-tale written during the Boer War. Peter Cray Shupe, in spite of his name only a gag man, and the author of dialogue which came along just in time to prevent a provident star from buying Los Angeles County and the City Hall, wisecracks to a giddy girl who still believes cheap comedies are stepping stones to fame and that "gag" lovers can get a short-time sweetheart a part even there. Harry Devron, a loudspeaker scenarist-director-supervisor of the type that made Britishers so popular in Berlin about 1914, listens to his secretary speak of things hoydenish, as he peeks down her neck, and Don Townsend, long past any such simple interests, sits trying to pry his few faculties loose from *The Green Ghost*, his latest meller, long enough to invent some lesbian story appropriate for this gathering. Anemic Sarah Flick, a still-living caricature of Lady Nicotine, looks a trifle overshadowed by the great Libido Wolff, whose mechanical staff are always on the alert to close any windows or doors wherever he happens to be privately coaching some new leading lady. Hintl, the European master, has been induced to join the luncheon party. They found him at a window, whistling at some children on the street, and being completely surprised in this he had hardly the face to refuse the invitation. Dick Elder is among us, not in anticipation of any pleasure, but to

cultivate King. He and Lira and myself are in the same boat there. This is one way where Lira is smart beyond her years: she fully realizes the necessity of sacrificing herself in little things. So far she has dodged the bigger sacrifices—except, of course, in the matter of Tony Devereaux, and there she thought she was in love. It cost her some of the love of life at that. I think she really believes she never will care much for any man now. . . . This digression is to avoid a further description of a poor assortment of Hollywoodticks.

We have a few drinks, Lira stretching hers out as much as possible, and the conversation, if it may be politely named, gets under way. A sequence of soliloquies would probably describe it more accurately, for each writer is telling himself how great he is, and the others are murmuring, "Mothballs!"

"Yes, I wrote that story without ever seeing the South Seas," declares Gay. "I took a trip later to validate it."

"Nothing on me," Walter retorts. "I wrote a sex story when I was four years old."

"Really?" exclaims someone who doesn't know how dangerous it is to feed this brilliant monologuist.

"Yeh. Took a trip later to validate it."

Moll and Gay scream above the chorus.

"He's a darling," says Gay passionately to her escort, and loudly enough for Walter to hear. This may be good for a liaison.

"I've a new stenographer," Wolff remarks, "who has just graduated from business college——"

"And you believed her?" Devron puts in.

"Tush," says Townsend, "he carries the evidence."

When the wheezing has subsided to a stale odor, Wolff continues:

"Joe Bloomenwall agreed with me on her simplicity and decided to make a test. He dictated to Julie the following note for me, and observed with satisfaction that her expression changed not any. She brought me the memorandum, and as I read it I observed the same thing. It read simply: 'See the Sound Department about that prostate gland trouble of yours.' I met the childish eyes and said: 'Thanks, Julie.' She returned my look with a sudden dazzling smile and replied: 'Don't thank me, darling—thank your lucky stars!'"

The familiar obscene note has been sounded, and being trained minds the assembled persons digress very little from their theme, until Lira looks sick and presses my hand as a signal to make the earliest reasonable getaway.

Being a village boy from the far Northeast I resentfully try to blame Hollywood for all this, but I find no native Californian among us, and none from a larger city than Columbus, Ohio—except the great Hintl. Just a bunch of warmed-over provincials, yearning to be thought sophisticated, and so scared of each other we take cover in the lavatory.

"Lira Morgan," says Moll, with smiling malice, "how on earth do you still manage to blush after five years in pictures?"

"Maybe that's how," returns Lira, not too vaguely.

"Oh, now I say," the Hungarian unexpectedly remarks in a London accent, "I say——"

But a good-looking waiter comes into the scene, and the director loses his thread of thought, giving Walter and Gay an opening which is hardly worth development.

"Let's beat it," Lira whispers.

"You can't after that last one."

She thinks it over and stays. Half an hour later we shovel our way out, and she starts coaxing me to go with her to her hideout—the Wigwam, where Ellen Reilly occupies a unit fifty-fifty with Lira.

Ellen has been in the movies for fifteen years, as script girl and stenographer. She says she hates it; she has refused a hundred offers of various kinds from the males of the business and is still typing scripts and numbering scenes. Lira never showed better judgment than in choosing her as a companion following the bust-up with Tony. A key to the apartment has admitted her on many a night after a fuss at home, over nothing, to the rest and comfort of Ellen's solid friendship. Many screen stars have hideouts, but Ellen and Lira believe this one to be well-nigh inaccessible.

★ ★ ★

It is mid-afternoon when we arrive at the Wigwam, and Ellen has been here, but a search in the two small bedrooms and on the balcony cot fails now to produce her. I look longingly through the heavy Spanish doorway to the cot on the balcony, coveting a siesta, but Lira wants to chat.

"I feel goofy to-day," she confides. "I'm sick of everything. I've a notion to ask for a week off and fly to New York. You and Jane come too, won't you?"

"New York?"

"No—Arizona—the Yosemite—maybe Mexico City."

"What's the matter with India?"

"Oh, hell!" she mumbles, suddenly deflated, and lights another cigarette. Then she gets up and wanders around the room.

"I wonder if there'd be an organ recital on the air—I crave church music."

I sit waiting for the organ to start. There is a silence, and then I hear: "Hello!"

She is reading a note picked up from the radio cabinet. "It's from Ellen," she volunteers.

"Eloped?"

"Look at this." She hands me the penciled message.

Lira, there's a handsome hick from up north, living in the neighborhood and he's tracked you here. I suppose I should have squelched him, but I hadn't the heart. I think you'll have to see him, because I imagine he's an old friend

and didn't want to say so for fear of embarrassing you. Name is Massey, and he's coming back at four.

ELLEN.

"Massey? I don't remember any Massey."

"Probably just a chiseler. It's four o'clock now."

Lira folds the note, instead of tossing it in the waste basket.

"Still, Ellen never does let these people in. This man must have looked different. I half believe I'll see him."

"Why not? . . . I'll run along, then——"

"You will not—he may be coming to murder me—you never can tell."

"Don't be silly—she says he's a farm lad. Give him a break."

"No—you've got to stay, Jack. Why not lie out here on the balcony cot?"

To humor her I stretch myself out on the cot, and she goes to her bedroom to fix up—as though she were a country school teacher and he the new student preacher. What kick she can get out of this sort of thing is more than I can imagine, but more power to him if he can take her mind off Tony Devereaux for an hour.

I am dozing when the doorbell rings. Sitting up, I draw the canvas curtains together around the balcony to facilitate a siesta should the rube be allowed to linger, and leave a crack between the double doors through which, if it seems worthwhile, to cast an occasional

glance upon the scene. If I am by any chance discovered she is to introduce me as a doctor, or a director, or a husband, as the necessity may arise.

I have done some unusual things in the service of this movie queen, most of them at the behest of Jane, my wife, another young Northerner whom I consider as tempting as Lira; but this is the first time I've had to eavesdrop on a fan.

She opens the door, and I hear her say, "How do you do." There is a pause then, as though he were collecting his breath. At least he isn't a Fuller Brush man. To my surprise he doesn't exclaim: "Are you really Lira Morgan?" but in a voice any mixer would O. K., remarks calmly enough: "Miss Morgan, my name is John Massey. I'm from Alberta, Canada."

There follows another brief silence, after which Lira says: "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you."

He sits where I can get a glimpse of him, and to my comfort, Lira does too.

The Canadian is tall, rugged, and handsome, with heavy brown hair, blue eyes, regular features, a particularly firm mouth, and a natural grace of manner. His face is well tanned, and I see no worry tracks.

Lira seems to like his looks—or is it him? That was somewhat evident in the tone in which she invited him in. I've seen other men that she liked pretty well at first glance, but she didn't wear just this expression.

"You say you're from Alberta?"

"Yes—I wrote to you once from there—— But maybe I'd better not mention that."

Lira's face shows surprise but no displeasure.

"So you're the Canadian poet!"

"No—not a poet. But you— you actually remember that?"

"I remember that you promised yourself to stay up there 'where you'll always belong.'"

"So I should have." John's faint smile is extremely diffident.

"How is that?"

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not say."

Lira continues to study him a moment, while he isn't looking.

"I'm curious to know how you found me, here. This is supposed to be my hideout."

"I didn't shadow you—honestly. It's hard to believe, I guess—but it began when I saw you in a dream."

She looks at him, wonderingly, without replying.

"Thanks for not laughing," he says simply.

"Why should I laugh? It's very interesting, Mr. Massey."

"Thank you, Miss Morgan," he returns, and the "Miss Morgan" strikes me just right. "I had fallen asleep at the edge of a poplar grove on my ranch—I live up on the Red Deer River, you know, in Alberta—north of Calgary."

"That sounds nice and remote, doesn't it?—'on the Red Deer River, in Alberta!'"

"The likeness in this dream was too true to be an accident. I suppose those things can be explained—but, anyway, it happened, and I recognized you the moment I saw you in a picture—with more or less of a shock, I must admit."

"I'm sorry about the shock."

John replies only with a smile of his own.

"Maybe there's something magic about the screen," she says, helping him along. "I have a girl-friend in pictures who got a letter from a British officer in the Sudan. He had had the same experience about her."

"Is that so?—But then I can easily believe it."

"Are you quite sure you had never seen me in a picture?"

"Quite. . . . Naturally, I kept track of you afterwards, though. It was in Edmonton that I got a sort of a second jolt. Your leading man looked something like myself, and you called him John."

"That's it!" Lira exclaims. "John Benton. I've been trying to think whom you were like."

The Canadian's glance bounces off bashfully as he says: "That's my own name."

"So finally you got up the nerve to search me out, was that it?" Not sure this was the right remark, Lira adds hastily and none too smoothly: "Well, I'm very glad you did, John Massey."

She has had to address screen suitors this way. Don't blame her.

"I hadn't thought of it as taking nerve," he replies, without any suggestion of familiarity. "I always knew we'd—well—get through a conversation all right."

He does commit a kind of chuckle here, and Lira is evidently not certain that her movie-queenly dignity has remained untouched.

"I've always intended seeing Hollywood, some winter, and this year gave me the chance. I gave a hotel clerk ten dollars to find your address for me, but got ashamed of myself and told him not to bother. It didn't seem quite the thing to track you down."

This delights her.

"He kept the ten, I suppose?"

"Yes—he said he called at your mother's house and convinced her that he was some important person from New York."

"Was that about a week ago?"

"Yes."

"So that was the mysterious caller I've been worrying about!"

"I'm sorry if it has caused you any trouble."

"Oh, no—I was just curious. Please go on."

"Well—when I checked out of the hotel and asked him where I could find a room for a week he sent me to this very place—without telling me you lived here."

"Mother said she gave him this telephone—that's

how he traced it. She decided afterwards, when nothing came of it, never to do that again."

"These Wigwam apartments were more than I—needed, so I got a little place up the street, and thought I was seeing things two nights ago when *you* drove by in a car. I saw you get out here, and as you stood talking a moment with some girl I had time to come closer for a better look. I'll have to ask you to forgive this—but I did bribe the caretaker, and he told me the number of your apartment. I called earlier to-day and——"

"Yes, I know it from there on."

John glances up and slowly smiles.

"I won't be bothering you any more, though. I'm going back to-morrow."

"So soon?"

The tone undoubtedly has some slight solicitation.

"I've quite a bit of grain to ship, and I want to add a room to my log house."

"Is it a real log house?"

"Oh, yes—logs and slabs. Lots of timber farther up in that country. I finished it all inside with cedar—the other ranchers jolly me about it."

"Is your ranch big, too?"

"Not so very. I have only two thousand acres."

"*Only?*"

"It sounds a lot. But I need part of it for grazing and the lake takes up a hundred acres or so——"

"A real lake?"

"Oh, sure. Then there's the river. Lots of fish and ducks."

Lira sighs and murmurs: "Grand—heavenly." Or at least, that's how it looks from where I am. Massey sits waiting for her to say something.

"Are you quite sure the dream-girl you saw in the poplar grove," she asks him for a second time, "was the exact one who later came on the screen?"

"Yes, I am. Don't you believe it could have been?"

"I'm not sure—perhaps I might if I weren't mixed up in it myself."

"Well," says John thoughtfully, and unconsciously sighing, as Lira did a moment ago, "it all happened, anyway, and to tell the truth, it seemed more real than you do now—or than I do—sitting here."

Lira passes the cigarettes, taking one herself.

"Smoke?"

"Thanks."

John produces a lighter and negotiates the business of giving her a light as well as any lounge lizard could do. I therefore take pains to observe that his business suit, his linen, and his shoes, are on a par with the garb of any ordinary man of affairs.

"I hope you didn't mind my sending those verses," he ventures diffidently.

"Indeed not. I liked them."

"I'm afraid I got that habit in military service—there's so much time to kill, you know."

"Were you in the trenches at all?"

John smiles a little. "Slightly."

"You must have been awfully young."

"I got in at seventeen and out at forty."

"Forty?"

"It seemed that long. They reluctantly let me go at twenty-two."

"Five years! . . . imagine. . . . Did you go in from school?"

"No—from a bank. My parents had both died in Manitoba, and I had asked the bank I was working for to transfer me west. After the army life, I couldn't go back in an office, so I took up ranching."

Lira favors and endangers him with one of her nicest off-stage smiles. "Do you know what I think you are?" she demands. He meets the look in kind.

"I daren't bite on that."

"A self-made man."

He was undoubtedly in Paris and Boulogne on many a furlough, but he drops his eyes now, and there is a pause.

"You're very good-looking, Mr. Massey. Are you certain you didn't come here on account of pictures?"

John laughs a little, eloquently.

"Do fellows from the tall grass really do that, Miss Morgan?"

"*Do* they? The town's full of them. Thousands of

them, averaging three weeks' extra-work out of every fifty-two. Nobody knows how they exist."

"Yes—I've read about them, but could hardly believe it. No—you could never make an actor out of me. I like to be where things grow—where there's lots of elbow room and you can see the mountains."

"It's the only place anyone *should* live." She speaks wistfully.

"That's queer," says John.

"What is?"

"I've often wondered if you wouldn't feel that way."

"Have you?"

"Of course, I can see how you're too famous and successful now ever to think of—deserting; but it's a bit too bad at that."

He says this evidently with no thought of challenging her interest. Lira studies him more closely.

"Why—do you think I'd have made a happy ranch wife?"

"Yes—I rather do—if you hadn't gotten used to this more—spicy life."

"Spicy?"

"I mean—excitement—cocktails—cigarettes—fame—lots of money to spend."

"How do you know I live that way?"

"Don't you?"

"Well, how do you know I like it?"

"I suppose it's the same in anything. Some of my

buddies joined the regular army and went to India after the war. We're all such lonesome creatures in this world."

I never knew Lira to drag out an interview like this, even where it meant publicity, which I trust this never will.

He observes that she has no answer, and concluding no doubt that the conversation has finally bored her, rises and says he thinks he'll be going.

"Don't go," she says quickly, snapping out of her trance-like silence, "—please. I'd like you to stay and have tea with me."

John is surprised and delighted but tries to be casual.

"That's corking of you, but I—but you——"

"Now, you're going to stay. Wash your hands, and I'll let you cut the bread. The bathroom is the second door on your left."

This does alarm John a trifle, but being anxious to get me off the balcony Lira shooes him out.

"Jack," she says, "*vamos!* This looks like it!"

On the way to the nearest exit I don't halt as I ask:

"Looks like what?"

"Good-bye," says Lira.

"Jack, I'm afraid I've found something I want."

This is how I'm greeted as I enter the hideout, answering an urgent phone call.

"As bad as that?"

"If not worse."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Keep him here in Hollywood if I can."

"Does he know you are?"

"Of course not. He doesn't even know I like him."

"Sounds like a good yarn. How much of it do you want to tell me?"...

...I can't believe it was only last night. It seems to me we must have been kids together in the sagebrush country. We speak the same language, feel the same way about everything. What I can't understand is how he could believe it would be this way between us. And yet I do understand too. We had to meet. I guess it's always this way if it's real—only most people aren't as sudden as I am. They'd feel it, but wouldn't be so quick to recognize it, much less admit it. My picture experience, I suppose. Emotions are our stock in trade—we get so sensitive to attractions or repulsions.

The moment he walked in the door I was drawn to him. I knew how his voice would be, and that he wouldn't become boresome. Do you know how long he stayed?—Till nearly three o'clock. He was so surprised he almost apologized—almost, but he's not the apologetic kind. About ten o'clock Ellen telephoned that she wouldn't be home—working all night. You see?—the stage was set. It always is when a scene is really scheduled to play in your life.

About midnight he started to leave, and I hauled him back by both hands. He looked at me quickly, frowning for a second, and he must have been thinking it was a seduction scene, but the next instant he blushed, and I took this as a sign that he knew he'd been wrong. Soon he took my hand to see how long the life line was, and after that our hands just naturally kept finding each other every time we discovered something more we had in common.

I must have told him everything that ever happened to me—oh no, of course not that, but everything else, I guess. I'm going to tell him that too, before I—before we——

"Before you what?"

Jack, listen—I've got to find out for sure whether I'm stuck on him or not. The way I feel right now, there'll never be anyone else just like him. It may be the worst thing in the world for both of us, but I can't help it, and I don't think he can either. If people really do "fall" in love, it looks as if we might be doing it.

"Did he say so?"

No. He didn't have any thought of kissing me goodnight, either. But I must have kept looking at him or something, because finally he said: "You throw a sort of spell around me, Lira. I'm glad we're parting. Goodnight." I could just feel him taking a grip on himself. Oh—it's grand, Jack—please forgive me for raving—

take it as a compliment, won't you? But surely nothing like this ever happens to a person twice.

"Well—why am I sent for—what do I do?"

I expect him any time—I wanted you to meet him, just as I'd want you to inspect my parachute if I were about to jump from an airplane. I know you're brave enough to save my mind if I'm crazy, and broad-minded enough to let me go on being happy if that's what I am. Now I'm going to have a bath, and if he comes, keep him to yourself a few minutes, so I won't get excited and drown myself. . .

. . . The notes of a mocking bird whistling from a sycamore that shades the balcony make an appropriate theme song for my drowsy thoughts as I sit waiting for the visitor. Will she get over this in a few days or break loose and do something rash? I've often wondered how she has managed to endure the yoke of Zerensky. The overbearing Polish runt, he would go and beat the quota. That time he tried to get personal with her and threatened bad second-lead parts if she didn't give in—how did she make herself smile and keep her temper? And when the threat was actually carried out and the rotten parts were dished up, how did she hold down the hysterics month after month, while he grinned at her malevolently—keeping his distance only because she had become a money-maker, and he feared losing

her? If this Massey's attractions hold out a week or two, may she not easily make a break for freedom and let her mother have the hysterics? What then will become of the real estate equities with which Maria Griffith has become loaded by flattering brokers, and the payments through 1935, from the daughter's picture contract, on which, as she believes, she has so conservatively counted? Picture folk have a way of kicking out of their harness when the hide becomes sufficiently raw. There was George Hubert. His soul was so sick, he started out preaching. Elenita, the Spanish star, is headed for a Mexican convent, they tell me. And why try to tabulate the suicides?

The door stands open; nevertheless, my caller uses the knocker. I rise and introduce myself.

"Miss Morgan said she wanted me to meet you," says Massey, and I get a better look at his smile than a crack in the door afforded yesterday. This is about the widest-open face I've seen since I worked on a Montana newspaper. How am I going to help liking him?

"She's primping a little," I explain. "Said she wouldn't be long."

"Thanks."

I decide to get as much out of him as possible in the time allowed me.

"How do you like Hollywood?"

"It's a very nice town . . . a bit lonesome."

"Lonesome! Where have you been?"

"Most everywhere. I've taken in everything they told me about—attended one of those searchlight parties at the Chinese Theatre, and a lot of other things."

"Well, of course," I remark, "when a fellow's by himself——"

"It isn't that altogether—although I have been alone. But the sun goes down so suddenly—and those birds—that one out there—singing at night—and then the picture shows—you hear people discussing them on all sides, naming their friends on the screen and dissecting the whole business till you can't think of the people in the story as real or your favorite idols as old friends you've come into town to see. You know?—it all sort of lets you down."

I begin to feel that I know this boy already. What a novelty to see a fellow sit still like this, after watching these neurotic jumping-jacks around Hollywood try to light. I can picture him on a truckload of wheat, pulling into his Western town toward sundown, anticipating a steak dinner at the Prairie House and a blissful two hours afterwards in the darkened movie palace, living through a story with a beautiful creature whom he has so often told himself he could care for as no ordinary man ever cared for an ordinary woman.

"You were lucky in running across her, Massey." I observe carelessly. "In fact, you're the first male fan, or mail one either, I've ever known to connect with

Lira Morgan at first attack, As a dodger of interviewers she ranks with John Considine, Jr."

"I guess she knows," says John modestly, "that I appreciate it and am willing to be thrown out any minute she says the word."

"When do you figure on going back?"

"I should go to-day." He frowns slightly, thinking, no doubt, of obligations up home.

"Have you much live stock?"

"Just a few hundred steers. I raise wheat too."

"Isn't wheat a pretty big gamble?"

"Yes, it is. But I've managed to keep ahead so far. If the seasons or the market should ever go too much against me, I'd go in for stock altogether—we have fine grazing in that section."

That this fellow isn't afraid of the world is obvious—would be even to the creators of our great outdoor screen heroes. Lucky beggar. Why couldn't he have been born in my shoes and I in his? Five years in the trenches, and he makes Lira's ace leading men look like repainted Chevrolets.

"I'd like to see that country of yours. If I took a gang up there on location sometime, could your nearest town accommodate us?"

"Oh, yes," he returns enthusiastically. "Red Deer's quite a nice little place—several hotels there. . . . Do you suppose you ever would go that far for scenery?"

"Well, we'd probably take care of the scenery on the

lot—but there are times when it pays to get that far away from the textile business. I've even known us to hit on an original scene, once or twice, when we got enough distance on our side."

The Canuck smiles, after a moment's hesitation. "Oh, yes—I've read a little about that in some of the picture magazines. I guess you writers have your troubles pleasing everybody."

Oh-oh! . . . He's now going to let me into the secret of his life. He has a story for his favorite star. Lira has framed me, and now I'm going to have to read this man's epitaph.

"You write yourself, I suppose?"

He glances at me rather sharply, for a rancher, but I am so casual his evident suspicion that I've already heard some of his poetry is allayed.

"No—I don't. I like reading too well ever to want to write."

This is uncanny. I must get to the bottom of this.

"Have you seen many of Miss Morgan's pictures?"

"Most of them, I guess."

"Didn't it ever strike you, you could do better for her with a yarn of your own?"

"Well—I can't say that I ever thought much of the stories—one way or the other. Now that you mention it, though, I'm sure they were better than anything I'd ever invent myself—even if I were a writer."

The boy is good. He must have sized me up pretty

fast. I wonder how they get as shrewd as that out in the sticks?

"I want to congratulate you, Massey. You're the only person, male or female, that I ever talked to about pictures for ten minutes without being asked to read a scenario."

He favors this remark with a fairly hearty laugh, so I am satisfied he has a rare sense of humor. I gurgle a little myself to be sure he is laughing *with* me.

I tap him from all sides, on all subjects, but I can't seem to get the sound "punk" from any spot on him. I discover myself wishing he'll stay in town a while longer, so I can go around with him a little. I believe he'd do me good, and I'd like to get his reaction to a lot of things here. By and by I come to the point I've been aiming at from the start but didn't want to plunk too soon. I speak with a whimsy and my lightest smile.

"Not aiming to run off to that romantic country of yours with our fixed star, I hope?"

"If I were the Prince of Wales," says he, in the same vein, "I sure would try it."

"How do you know movie queens like princes?"

"Well—I suppose a prince could be a nice ordinary fellow—but what can a nice ordinary fellow be, as a rule?"

"If that's how you feel, I begin to suspect that after all you did come to submit a story. What else would there be in a visit like this for you?"

Here he gives me a look so direct it disturbs my own sense of importance a trifle.

"She said you were the one person of all the people she knows that she confides in and trusts a hundred per cent, so I guess I can tell you, too, Warde, that while I worship her, I have no designs on her. And if I thought for a moment that my calling on her like this would embarrass her in the least, I'd be off—quick."

"Oh, no," I hasten to explain, "I didn't mean that. Lira's all right—we can take it for granted that she's love-proof—I was merely thinking of you."

"Well," says John, and while I don't hear the sigh, I feel that it's there, "it's been worth a whole lot to know Miss Morgan is exactly as I had pictured her—and it will naturally be a great thing to see her there on the screen, during the long years of her career, and realize that we are—good friends—and that she is—more real than anyone else I've—ever known."

If this calls for a reply I'm either too human or too dumb to phrase it, so I sit silent, and John does too. Lira comes in and finds us, therefore, looking if anything a trifle sad. John rises and extends his hand. Lira gives him hers and smiles a new one. She is wearing a high coiffure and a pinkish chiffon afternoon dress, which brightens her color, tightens her waist, and heightens her figure. I've never seen her look so lovely.

★ ★ ★

The vibration is there, don't tell me. John may swear he will never coax her away from her career, and Lira may swear she won't ever fool him by making him believe she could live on a Canadian ranch, but *I* swear they don't know what they're liable to do, and I don't either. I've seen Lira with many other boys of various degrees of intelligence and good-looks, but none of them ever made her look like this before.

"Well," I declare, using my watch, "you may not be aware of it, Miss Morgan, but I have a new sequence to work into that pallid continuity they call your forthcoming love-life, and I must be putting on my goloshes, mudguard, and gas mask, preparatory to the assault. This, in a word, means ta-ta for now."

"Do you mind?" She addresses herself to Massey, who hardly knows how to take it.

"Uh—oh-no, of course not. It's been—er—fine to get acquainted with you, Mr. Warde."

"Same from this direction, Massey. If you pull out, and Lira sees you beyond the suburbs, she'll probably drag me along as her chauffeur."

"I'll look for you."

Lira glances from me to John with some concern, then excuses herself from him a moment as she walks out to the entrance balcony with me.

"Jack, I want you to do something for me."

I will to become momentarily passive, expecting anything.

"He's got to stay a few days. Of course I *would* be all tied up every day. But I'll be free evenings. You take him around a little daytimes, if I persuade him to stay over, won't you?"

"Sure. . . . Is that all?"

"Yes, and thanks so much. I'll phone you to-night."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"I thought you had me meet him so I could tell you if he holds water?"

"I don't have to ask you. I could see he had you impressed. Besides, I heard some of the conversation."

"Oh-ho. That last crack of his, for instance?"

"Yes. . . . Isn't he gorgeous?"

"Listen, Lira—I wish you'd leave words like that to Louella Parsons."

Lira giggles. "He's so grand you're jealous!"

"Baby, if I were in John Massey's shoes right now I'd shoot myself. But he's all you said he was, apparently. And, God bless his soul, he has no story for nobody. If I were wedded to a less *gorgeous* creature than I am, and hadn't seen so much footage of you where you tried to appear in love with boiled hams—yes—very likely—I'd slip him the prussic. But as it is, I fearfully, and hesitantly, and prayerfully wish you luck, kid."

"You're a darling."

"And whatever happens I'm for you."

"I knew it, Jack, but it's gor—it's marvel—it's damned good to hear it."

It is a part of my everyday labor to reproduce scenes that might have occurred in real life. I am what they call a "dialogue director." There is no such thing, but that's what I am. The material the scenario department gives me is often so terrible that I have to have my own blood transfused into the cockeyed characters to make them walk, and my own words put in their mouths to make them talk. By the time I finish with them I sometimes think myself that they're alive. Another thing: I always labor with them in the present tense. The past tense doesn't exist for a dialogue doctor.

Imagine then the ease and joy with which I take Lira's next confession, told to me to-morrow but which I relate to-day, because there is no to-morrow in pictures—real emotions between real people whom I know and admire—and reconstruct the scene, thus ignoring the dimension of Time, as dear old Albert Einstein has tried to make us all understand we should.

I congratulate myself on having so recently decided to make copy of her, and on the hunch that foresaw in her the possibilities of an early and interesting upheaval....

John is wearing a gray suit, with white shirt, black tie, and black shoes. Glad to be rid of me, they speak

kindly of me, John expressing the opinion that I "talk like any ordinary business man," and Lira passing over that carelessly to commend her caller for his good taste in clothes.

"It's only because these English goods always look well to you Americans. The black tie was an accident."

Lira is thinking that she could take him, just as he is, into any nice restaurant on the Boulevard, and he'd pass for somebody's new leading man.

"How are you to-day?" she asks him, very awkwardly for her.

"I'm fine, thank you. And you—you look fleecy as a cloud. Are you certain the breeze off the balcony won't blow you away?"

"I'm not certain of anything."

"Don't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because I feel the same way myself."

"Well, why can't I too?"

"Because," and John smiles enough to modify it, "it might be dangerous for two."

Lira meets his look a moment, unsmilingly, then fixes her eyes on the pepper trees as she says:

"Go on, John."

He says nothing for several moments, and doesn't look at her as he clandestinely captures her hand.

"I—I could, Lira. But would it be just right? I break in on you from nowhere, knowing you well but a

stranger to you—and because you happen to be—in a mood for romance, maybe—I get a beautiful reception like this—and feel as guilty as a dog."

"You don't sound so sure of the dream as you did?" Lira doesn't realize herself that the lines were spoken shyly.

"The trouble is—I'm too sure of it now."

Perhaps he feels the lacquered fingers tighten a little, or maybe he gets on the same wave-length with a sigh which she wants to suppress. He looks at her directly as he says:

"Do you want me to tell you exactly how I feel and then go on my way? Do you just sort of imagine that you'd like to hear it?"

She holds her lips rather closely compressed as she answers with merely a nod.

The Canadian's face becomes more firm and at the same time softer. His voice is steady as he grips her hand tightly now and starts to speak.

"If I were some effective person down here, where your future is, and you looked at me twice, I'd tell you you were all I had ever dreamed about since I first realized that women were desirable. I'd tell you I loved you and wanted to be always right beside you, as the only one *you* loved. I'd confess that I felt all shaky and trembly every time you touched me——"

John breaks off, as he realizes that the hand he holds is doing this very thing.

"John," she says, as she lets him see the tears in her eyes.

"Lira!" . . .

She is in his arms. . . .

"I love you. It's no use—I love you."

"I want you to," she says. "I can't help it either. . . ."

Lights begin to appear among the peppers, acacias, and eucalypti beyond the railing of the balcony.

"I agree that you shouldn't have come, dear. Neither should I have let you see me a second time after I found how you affected me. But it happened, and here we are —and what else matters?"

"It will be a wonderful thing to take back with me," he says quietly.

Lira watches his profile, waiting for further punishment of this sort, unable to believe it will come.

"The sooner I go now, the better, don't you think?"

"No." She says it slowly. "I don't think."

John tries not to answer the wayward smile.

"How often I've seen that look in her eye on the screen—but I never kidded myself that it would ever be aimed at me."

"You never saw this look, big man of the North."

It invites another kiss.

"Do you really, honestly, truly love me, John?"

"Gosh, Lira, this is awful—how about putting some distance between us?"

"Don't run away—it may be even worse for me!"

John laughs a little. "What a playboy you are!"

They seesaw and make love, make love and seesaw. A pair of Mexican doves join the finches in the sycamores.

"Let's suppose a lot of things," says Lira. "Let's suppose I gave up this picture racket and went with you to Canada."

"You'd get terribly lonesome—you'd fret for the excitement and notoriety of Hollywood—and I'd soon have to keep away from you entirely, to avoid being shot."

"So that's the kind of an Amazon you think I am?"

"Lira Griffith, you're perfection. But also you're temperamental. If you weren't, you wouldn't be such a success in your work. But if I took you away up in a pioneer country and corralled you there, don't you know you'd never be able to stand it?"

"How about you?—how do you stand it?"

"I couldn't have, before the war. I used to like town life. But the things you go through under fire, for a long period of time, change you a lot. If it hadn't been for that I'd probably have come to Hollywood a long time ago and tried to get a job in some studio—and been a whole lot worse off."

"Would you have done that, hoping to see me sometime?"

"Maybe. Maybe hoping you'd even speak to me some day, and let me touch my cap to you."

Lira burdens him with still closer contact, wedging her supple form against his side on the low, modernistic sofa.

"Dreams do come true after all," she murmurs, and watching him mischievously begins to whistle softly: "Kiss me again."

John, however, doesn't seem to catch on. His frown foreshadows further gloomy thoughts. Something must be done about it.

"So you don't want to marry me?" she remarks casually.

His answer to this is more gratifying than she anticipated. He picks her up neatly and deposits her on his lap.

"How do you like that?" he demands.

"I love it."

"Look at me straight and then say what you did a minute ago."

She obeys. "Yes," she admits. "I guess you do."

"But," says John, "wanting something and getting it are two different things. I don't know about the movies—but that's how it is in real life. How I want Lira Morgan is nobody's business—not even hers. But——"

"Why isn't it my business, Yonny?"

"Darned if you aren't the limit! Are you having a circus, really?"

"And how."

He makes a brave attempt at lecturing her again, but it ends in a series of clinches.

"You know, John, you're nothing in the world like these men who hang around my profession. I have as much love for the screen hero as I have for Al Capone—no, *not* as much. But rather than lose you I believe I'd almost try persuading you to come here and be an actor."

"My god," murmurs John incredulously.

"None of them could stand up alongside of you, and as for acting—Jack Warde could help you."

"And how would it help *you* to have a big hick like that for a husband?"

"He wouldn't be a big hick, and nobody would need to know he was my husband."

"You mean—married on the quiet?"

"In Mexico or somewhere."

John appears to be examining the glistening nails minutely.

"You know, you're only talking. I had my dream, and now it's your turn. But some things are to be and others aren't. I know that one thing I never will be is an actor."

"Thank goodness," she murmurs, so softly he has to ask her if she said anything.

"That's odd," she replies. "All the men I know think they could have been a success on the screen. I sometimes suspect that even Jack Warde does."

(A suspicion so shrewd as to need no further mention.)

"Lira," he asks suddenly, "how many years do you want me to give you to wind up your screen career and entertain a proposal from an old friend?"

"Years?" says Lira. "Don't you talk to me about years!" Then— "Would you wait that long for me, really?"

"Just try me."

"I won't, either. Think you're going to waste my youth and beauty that way?"

"I can't quite believe that I'm sitting here with you, and that we're talking as we are. But I can believe that this time to-morrow I'll be heading northward in an open Dodge car."

"Don't keep mentioning that. You know I won't let you go. If you insisted, it would only mean that I'd quit everything and go along. I'm a spoiled movie girl, and you don't know how."

"You feel like this now, but you wouldn't do it—even if I were selfish enough to let you."

"If you know what I'd do in any situation, you're the first person who ever did."

He rests on his guns.

"John, listen to me. There are hundreds of very

beautiful girls in this town. Every one of them is looking for a normal, handsome, self-reliant man like you and can't find him. Can't find him because he isn't to be found, among the Hollywood breed. Do you think, with my claws actually fastened onto such a fellow, that I'm going to let him get away?"

"Now, look, dear," he struggles, "be sensible. I had to see you—for three years I've known I'd have to see you. You must know how powerful the impulse was, to bring all this about. But I feel just as strongly now that I must get away from you and let things work out their own way. If I should up and out on you, all of a sudden, you'd understand, wouldn't you?"

"If you did that," says Lira calmly, "I'd feel that my powers of attraction were pretty weak, not to be able to hold you for at least a week."

This is an old feminine formula, but John hasn't bothered much about women, and the angle may be new to him.

"Would a week come any nearer convincing you—than the few hours we've already had together?"

"Will you—will you stay a week, John?"

"But it would only be all the harder to go then. You see that, don't you?"

"I only see one thing," she says wonderingly, provokingly, "—you."

John sighs, beginning perhaps to have some slight idea of what he is up against.

"I thought you said you had a busy week ahead of you?"

"I have. But you could see me in the evenings. And wouldn't you like to have me take you on the set, where you could watch me work?"

"Well, I admit, Lira—that would be great. Only, I'd want to be sure I wasn't embarrassing you."

"The only way you can embarrass me is by running away in your Dodge and leaving Jack Warde to suppose that you discovered some crimson past and dropped me into it."

John laughs.

"You—with a crimson past!"

"As I supposed," says Lira, trying to nod her head although it is in a cramped position, "he idealizes her."

"Maybe I *am* a bit cowardly," John reflects aloud, "in not being willing to prolong the suffering a day or two. But you know, I'm serious. It hurts—honest—to want you and have to fight myself around you."

She makes a heroic effort and gets off his knee. As she stands above him, fixing her hair, her troublesome figure outlined against the haze of light filtering through the balcony doorway, she says gayly:

"All right—two days—and I promise to help. No vamp stuff—just good friends. Jack will show you the town during the day, and we'll see each other in the evenings."

"Two days. All right—I agree."

He rises and stands facing her in the dimly lighted apartment.

"You know, dear, if I gave in to my feelings it would spoil everything. It's dead easy to be weak. . . . I get a kick worth my whole life, past and future, out of a kiss from you, but I want your respect—your real love—more than I do—that. So don't coax me to stay after the two days are up, will you?"

The answer comes after a pause, in small tones.

"Not if you don't want me to."

Following a moment's hesitation he decides to leave it like this.

"You must be hungry, aren't you?"

"Not very."

"Shall I bring something here to eat?"

"No. . . . Let's go somewhere. . . . I may not seem so weak to you in a restaurant."

"Why, Lira Morgan, I didn't say you were weak."

"You meant it."

"Honest I didn't."

She turns away and starts for the bedroom. John catches her, and finds himself kissing a moist face.

"Forgive me," he says. "I think it had better be the restaurant, after all."

Henry's, on Hollywood Boulevard, is a place where picture people go first to eat and after that to look at one another. There are other restaurants in town where the

sight-seeing comes first. The stars themselves, however, don't as a rule congregate here any more, for the reason that lesser satellites, including meteors, rockets, and tourists now overrun the place.

When Lira, therefore, glides in with a six-foot stranger, who has none of the eye-tricks of a new stage celebrity, and is not, on the other hand, as self-conscious as a Rotarian in a church aisle, there is some slight stir among the dees-doze-and-dem boys on the sidelines, not to mention the raw-stock sob sisters scattered here and there behind the smoke screen. It so happens that Louis Zerensky, W. U. R. associate producer, Lira's present nemesis, and Madge Poke, his head reader, are among those present.

Lira catches a glimpse of them as she comes in, and takes pains to recognize them, because she knows John will worry them all evening. Professionals on all sides greet the W. U. R. featured player as she is led by Henry himself to a table she indicates, until John begins to feel somewhat the heat of the aura which so evidently blazes around her person.

"Who's the fella?" demands Zerensky of his middle-aged companion.

"I've never seen him before," returns Madge.

"Do you think he's anybody?"

"You never can tell. She'd hardly bring him here if he wasn't, would she?"

After studying the pair for some little time Zerensky says: "Have her see me to-morrow."

"I'd certainly never try to hold your hand in here," says John, as they sit at their small table, in view of many others. "I thought we were going to some quieter spot."

"I just wanted to give all the old girls a treat," Lira smiles.

"Well, I guess you did—they're still looking in your direction."

"My dear—I meant *you*."

John laughs ironically. "I always knew you'd be impish, but really I didn't look for so much modesty. By jove—you're blushing. Am I?"

"You're a sight."

"Honest?"

It's only now that he does blush. Lira is in danger of getting the giggles.

John is a trifle confused over the menu, but accepts, without asking for it, a little assistance from Lira, who conceals her amusement at his determination to do things for himself. She glances at the faces of men diners near by, comparing them unfavorably with John's clean-cut features, and marvels again at his complexion. He asks about the swarthy, pock-marked man with gray hair, talking to the gray-headed young woman, and is advised that this is a platinum blonde with her room

rent. An ex-prize fighter, an ex-preacher, and an ex-lawyer, now writing or directing comedies, occupy adjacent tables, and near them Lloyd Hamilton is listening to his latest gagman-guide tell the world that Charlie Chaplin, here in this restaurant only last week, called Lloyd "the world's greatest comedy genius." Other voices from other tables project phrases of flattery or self-praise in warm gusts, as Lira whispers an occasional name which should mean something to John but doesn't.

"Do they always talk about themselves like this?" he asks wonderingly.

"No," Lira admits, "not when they're sound asleep."

Four people rise from a table, third in line with Lira's, and the head waiter shows in three young men. One of them, more handsome than the others, stares at John and Lira as he passes, but deliberately avoids greeting her, and with a lover's quick instinct John observes that Lira is annoyed.

"I've seen that chap on the screen," says John unexpectedly—"in some war pictures. Tony—what's his name?"

"Devereaux," she answers. "How do you like the chops?"

"They're very good, thanks. . . . I haven't seen this Devereaux since the talkies came in. Did he lose out?"

"I think he's doing pretty well in foreign versions—he speaks several languages."

"You know everybody, don't you?"

"I know some of them too well."

John threatens to grin. "That's how you'd probably feel about me if you had to see too much of me."

"Sneak and coward," she answers, trying to stare him out.

"Hello, dahling," cooes a deep contralto voice, and John looks up to see a magnificent blonde with peculiarly intent eyes and a strangely curved mouth. She seems to pay no attention to him, and Lira doesn't introduce her.

"I'm on your set to-morrow, dahling, so I'll be seeing you."

Hal Mack comes "into scene," as the scripts say, at the moment that the blonde exits.

"Hello, Miss Morgan. How are you?"

"Hello, Hal."

"There's a character," Lira whispers.

"Who—the yellow-haired girl?"

"Girl? She's that neither in age nor anything else much. . . . I mean the man, Hal Mack. He can tell you more things about the tribes than anyone in Hollywood; can name a raft of persons of both sexes who are able to explain what a 'Hollywood triangle' is—speaks the real names of the Wampas who never wamped—and some say even knows a producer who doesn't say that the American public is only fourteen years old mentally."

"He looks sort of bored with everything."

"Do you think so? Why, that expression almost passes here for happiness. This is probably one of his exuberant evenings."

She watches John a while as he studies the faces of the guests with interest.

"Of course, I've never been there," she says, after some moments, "but don't they look to you like a trenchful of soldiers who've just learned they're about to go over the top?"

John admits there is a certain analogy in the way the cigarettes are handled, but points out that a commanding officer seems to be lacking.

"Well, being a Russian," Lira explains, "he'd probably be marching the other way."

"How is it, Lira, that after being in the swim for six years you can still stand back and talk about these people almost like a stranger?"

"That *is* funny, isn't it? I never thought of it. Maybe I don't really belong in pictures. What do *you* think?"

"I wish you didn't. I wish you were on the outside with me."

"How do you know I wouldn't like to be?"

A somewhat guilty smile is his only answer to this.

"You haven't told me much about your mother. What would she say if she knew you were dining in public with a common prairie dog?"

Lira tries to give him a look of rebuke, but it ends in a snicker.

"As long as the pay check is forthcoming I don't think Mother even stops to wonder if I still breathe. She hasn't time—someone might double her bid when she wasn't looking."

"That's just it—the pay check and the picture game go together."

"Who cares? Say, if we finish these parfaits we'll have to sit up all night. . . . Let's leave them."

"In that case—yes."

He warns her that when they reach the Wigwam she is going to be left at the gate.

"Oh, no, I'm not," she says.

"Why aren't you?"

"Because the Wigwam has no gate." . . .

Nevertheless, the hard-headed man of the great outdoors has his way and stands firmly on the tile entrance balcony.

"Just an hour . . . just half an hour."

"Nope."

"Then I won't kiss you good-night."

"I was hoping you wouldn't."

Lira goes in and slams the door.

"Good-night," he calls, and goes down the steps.

The door opens and she flies out. "John, please—don't go like that."

He comes back, half smiling, and kisses her very sedately.

"You *will* stay, as you promised?"

"Two days," he says.

"Then I'll have Jack take you around town in the morning and bring you to the studio in the afternoon."

"Good."

"You big—hard-hearted—mule-headed—darling"

She fools him, however, about the kiss, and closes the door, this time with less of a bang.

John goes down the steps without looking back.

. . . Two days, he says. He means it too. . . . Oh, he's great, Jack. My place in pictures doesn't worry him a bit—except as it means more excitement and luxuries than he thinks he could furnish. I mean he takes it for granted that he is of just as much importance—or maybe it's as little—as anybody else in the world. Yet he's the least conceited individual I ever knew. He was interested in everybody I pointed out to him at Henry's, but just as much in the others—and still not as though he thought they counted any more than his Canadian acquaintances. . . .

. . . We are sitting in my car, parked under a magnolia tree, about a block from the studio. The call is for 9:30 A. M., so we have a few minutes yet to talk; then I am to find John. . . .

. . . I couldn't sleep last night. You know, he wouldn't come in. He's made up his mind not to let himself

marry me. He realizes that I'd do it in a minute. In fact, I guess I've almost told him so a dozen times already. But he has so much principle he's next thing to a—to George Washington, or somebody as bad.

You know, if it weren't for two things, I'd pull the strings to get him in pictures. He's handsomer than any other man I know and has more poise in his left foot than any of these new juveniles have in their whole chassis. I'm glad you agree with me on that, because I would hate to lose faith in you. And after all, Walter Huston made a big success after thirty—or was it forty?

"What are the two things?"

He and I. . . . Even you don't know how much I want that man, but honest, rather than see him seduced into being an actor, or any other thing in this racket, I'd give him up and never see him again. But there's no use of worrying about that, because he'd probably be off anybody who ever hinted at it. There's no way out as far as I can see, except to yank the noose off of my neck and cut loose. Mother's hysterics would have to come to an end sometime, and if you ask me, a ranch would be a whole lot better place for her anyway.

"But you don't mean that you're seriously thinking of feeding Zerensky your contract and going on a farm?"

That's all I am thinking of. All that worries me is John—I'm so afraid he won't let me. Did you ever want

to do anything so badly that you just *knew* you wouldn't be allowed to do it? That's how I feel. . . . Then, of course, there's—one other little thing. He must know about Tony Devereaux.

"My god, Lira, I thought you were a modern!"

That's all right—he's going to know. Don't ever think I'd keep that from him. It's probably the hitch I feel certain is coming. Everything has been too lovely so far . . . just like a beautiful dream. You wish you'd never wake. . . . Ever you put this in one of those bum continuities of yours, and Jane will be at the mercy of a trust fund. . . . Tony saw us in Henry's last night. Funny I never used to notice that queer stare of his. He gave me a look last night that made me creep. I only hope John didn't notice anything. He seemed to like Tony as an actor—remembered him better than any of the others that were there last night. Just my luck, eh? . . . Look at the time. I've got to go. Phone at noon and I'll tell you what stage to find us on and whether the coast is clear. If it's the hot mug-scene with Ross Pilberry, I don't want you till to-morrow. I wouldn't have John Massey watch half a dozen takes on that spot for eight million dollars. . . .

. . . Massey is sitting on the doorstep of his bungalow court unit as I come along, and I see no great joy or expectation in his eyes at the prospect of a tour around

Hollywood with me. As he is in no hurry to get up, I sit down beside him.

"Warde," he says thoughtfully, "I've been debating something in my mind all morning—most of the night, too, I guess. I'm wondering if it wouldn't be better, after all, to light out—now—and not see Lira again."

"She thinks you told her you'd stick for two days yet."

"I did. But isn't breaking a promise as good a way as any to help a girl realize that you're the bunk?"

"Sometimes. But in this case I'm afraid she'd only be all the more convinced that you care too much about her."

"But she'd resent it enough to cut me, wouldn't she?"

"I doubt it. Lira is a very modern person—in some ways. She has very definite ideas of what she wants in this world, and knows by now, I guess, that after you've gotten what you went after, it isn't always as desirable to you as something more simple and everyday might have been. In other words, she's pretty well fed up with the hectic Hollywood life and believes she sees in that cedar cabin of yours a good spot to find what she's missed so far."

"It may be only a romantic idea with her—that's what scares me."

"You don't look like a fellow who'd be easily scared, John."

The Canuck meets my eyes squarely. "You think I shouldn't run away, then?"

This puts it up, more or less, to me. However, I guess I know better than anyone else how little of what she finds in John, Lira has found in any other man. And I've written her enough scenes, Heaven only knows, to be aware of the fire in her soul. What right have I to cheat her of a happiness that may last a year or two—or anyway a couple of days?

"Do you think a fellow should *ever* run away, John?"

"No, I don't," says John decisively, relieved. "And thanks, Jack."

Which, in my more or less contested opinion, makes a very nice fadeout for the one exterior scene at John's court bungalow.

Before starting out for a tour of the colony's famous homes, I remember that I must pick up a piece of new fiction at the Hollywood Book Store. The proprietor himself, O. B. Stade, serves me, and when he has finished I introduce him to John.

"Quite a cultured fellow," John remarks, as we leave the store.

"I thought you'd be interested in meeting Stade—he was one of Pancho Villa's colonels during the Villa rebellion."

"Honest? And now he's selling books?"

"The town's full of characters like Stade. I suppose there's nowhere on earth another city of a hundred and fifty thousand with so many exceptional persons among the population. A small percentage of them are in the pictures, and it's assumed by those who consider themselves on the inside that the rest live in hopes of breaking in. 'Why are they here?' the movie tribes are fond of sneering. The Chamber of Commerce says it's the climate. So between the Chamber of Commerce and the Movies, I side with the Knights of Columbus."

"Say, Jack, would you mind if we just walked along Hollywood Boulevard instead of looking at the movie homes? I've tramped it lots alone in the past two weeks, but it's different with you."

"Sure—I get you, John—I know where the exhibits are."

We saunter east along the Boulevard from Highland Avenue, watching the legitimate boys strut their stuff, some in spats, some in hats, and one in a dressing gown. To impress my companion, who remains unimpressed, I salute them all by their maiden names, and relate such little tales as are not too bare about each. One old fellow, however, calls for more than a passing glance, so we stop and shake his hand, and John listens with me to Old Hal's pathetic story. . . . Out of work, his wife lying ill of mind in care of the county, and Hal wandering from studio to studio, hoping for the seven-and-a-half call that seldom comes any more. I try to think of some

bit in the various stews coming up, but there's nothing, so I slip him a few dollars, to which Massey quickly adds, and pass along, followed by many blessings.

"He trouped for years with Hal Reid, Wally's father," I explain to John. "Says Reid used to blow into a town Saturday night, lock himself in his room with a two-dollar bottle of bromo-seltzer, and emerge Monday morning with a two-hour play. Rehearsals would start at once, and the show would more than likely go on that night. Some of the plays written this way made big money, Hal says; one of them, *Human Hearts*, built a town in Pennsylvania."

"It's all picturesque," says John, with a grim smile, "but so were some of those French villages before they got blown to pieces."

I look at the boy quickly, sure that he will be watching to see how he has impressed me with the shrewd wisecrack, but he evidently isn't thinking of me at all. How do they get this way in the tall grass? I'm just beginning to appreciate this bird.

"If you weren't from Canada," I suggest, "I'd ask you to try a glass of beer in one of these speakeasies along here."

"Let's look one of them over," says John.

The ex-vaudevillian lookout knows me, so we are admitted to Al's Well and find a group of the theatrically unemployed, reluctantly revealing to one another a measure of their past prominence, and ever and anon

upon the alert for the arrival of some assistant director one or more of whose crimes they may have been fortunate enough to eyewitness. I am relieved that none of the gang are illegitimate, all dating back to 1929 at the earliest, which enables me to pass for what I've been told I resemble—an extra. As we drink our beer we hear the following snatch of conversation:

"We couldn't do a thing about it—he simply raised his glass and said: 'Well—that's all.'"

"When was *this?*"

"Yesterday afternoon. I was standing right here. As he left the place he fell forward, and died on his way to the emergency hospital."

"Who was he?"

"Former cameraman for Valentino."

We pass Gregory Hallowell gazing into a stationery window where typewriter paper is advertised for forty-five cents a ream. I live in mortal fear of Greg, and pray that he won't see me now. "He has been ten years in Hollywood, peddling stories and taking insults from forty-dollar readers without ever selling a script, but he still believes in the potency of merit and the eventual acceptance of all 'good stories.' He still thinks a studio is an Aladdin's garden, and comes at me like clockwork every March first for another list of introductions which will help him 'in.'"

"Ten years," says John, shaking his head.

"A Harvard graduate, Greg came here and got a job with one of the scenario-school groups, a bunch of glib slickers who traded on the credulity of writers from Skagway to Cape Horn. Here, in the heart of the Film World, the fifth largest industry on earth, the hungry, harried Producers cry to heaven for literary material. Send us stories or we perish. You—you—you—all of you have ideas—there's a story in every home. We will buy them. Send them now. There is only one condition—the stories must be in some sort of professional form. And here is where the need of skilled dramatic guides comes in. The tuition is only a hundred dollars. Your masterpiece, after criticism and revision, may easily bring several thousand. Are you ready, unknown craftsman, to take your place in the charmed circle, amid the artistic environment your intellect craves?

"Greg saw several years of that bunk at close range, himself acting as a 'critic' of manuscripts submitted, tried all that time to put over just one story, either his or any other writer's upon which he had passed, saw the several hundred stenographers and copyists melt away to a dozen or less and the heads of the racket finally go bankrupt—then labored ten hours a day as a studio 'reader' for thirty-five bucks a week, until a relative put him out—and still he walks this boulevard looking in stationery windows and believing that studios really are looking for capable men, and for stories that will stay on the stomach after a hearty meal."

By way of variety we decide to have a shoe-shine, which gives us a fairly comfortable ringside seat.

"Yes, sure enough, there come the acrobats. . . . Those three, however, are now in the restaurant trade, the first being a waiter, the second a dishwasher, and the third a bootlegger.

"That chap at the curb—there's a boy with ability, but here's what happened to him. Through family influence brought to bear on one of our prominent writer-executives here, Bud got a job first as private secretary, then as assistant to a supervisor. He was given his chance to write and was making good when a dancer came along and went for his pay check in a big way. Bud blew it right and left on her, took her flattery, both as to his person and his ability, seriously—got to stepping around too fast to see the typewriter—and lost out. She tossed him over, and Bud never got up. He told me, with a hang-dog look, that so far as he knew his brain was dead. He mechanically makes the rounds, but he's so embittered that he can only think of how he hates the underlings to whom he now has to make his spasmodic applications for work. The last time I talked to this thousand-a-week boy, he was waiting to hear about a forty-dollar reading job under a red-headed Irishman who admits that 'all stories are formulas and nobody knows one when he sees it.'"

"I've always liked to read stories of the theatre and of pictures," says John. "I usually get them whenever

I can. Guess I'm just a little stagestruck, like everybody else. But I know I'd never be able to believe in it enough to gamble on it—because it seems to me to have no bottom."

"You cracked a kernel there, boy. It's the original and ever popular quicksand."

Some minor characters drift by, and John appears to get a kick even out of these.

"This is all mighty interesting to me," he declares. "Nothing entertains me like human beings."

"Well, boy, I figured that, because you size 'em up kinda quick yourself. Anybody who'd pick the choice of them all just by seeing them on the screen——"

"She *is* choice, isn't she?"

"Don't ask me to corroborate it, fella. You'll want all the credit yourself, later."

John laughs. He makes a good audience when the theme is Lira.

I am privileged at last to show my Western friend a real star. Her limousine crosses our line of vision slowly enough to give us a good glimpse of her depressed mask.

"Amelia Bundy—growing thinner every Sunday. . . . Eight years ago I used to see her bucking the extra line, getting around in a wheezy Ford touring car. A friend of mine had a grocery store in the neighborhood where Amelia rented a furnished room, and she used to come in for a quarter of a pound of butter, three eggs, and a nickel's worth of sugar. By and by, though, she figured

in a double discovery—she discovered him and he discovered her; then she went to the top. But the talkies and a shifty lover have been unkind to her, and she's on the skids. She may or may not have saved some money, but she's pining away for the other end of a telephone line, worrying about the legitimate girls who are able to say 'I am' without mentioning sweet potatoes, and hating, with consequent loss of much needed flesh, everybody and everything in pictures. Her last starring picture brought a nice contract—for Mary Pembroke, her rival in the cast. Now it is second leads. Next year—obscurity."

"They're all human, aren't they?'

"What did you expect?"

"Well—I was told that there wasn't any such thing as old-fashioned sex-attraction in Hollywood."

"You know different now, don't you?"

John's voice is at times as mellow as a fresh-turned furrow.

"Poor kids . . . just little girls . . . trying to buck the world."

Doggone this boy, I like him. He has one of those rare minds that don't stop at the surface.

"Yes, and remember that, next time you figure on breaking an important date with one of them!"

Assuming that this remark is one at last which he is permitted to hear, our colored boy shakes with laughter.

We pass along the Highway of Hope now toward Vine

Street, encountering several personages of more or less interest to Massey.

"The little fellow with the blue eyes is Ed Kaufman, supervisor of shorts at Universal—one of the few boys in town who are as deservedly well liked as Paul Bern, 'the little brother of Hollywood.' Before Ed met and happily married Thelma Salter, the 'Triangle Baby Star,' a few years ago, he had a strange experience. He went out to Santa Monica with a chip on his shoulder, to the famous psychic, George Dareos—everybody knows him here—and started in kidding the amiable and polished Britisher about his 'racket.' Dareos took it all in good part, and looking at Eddie with a penetrating glance said: 'Someone very near to you is going to meet a violent death within two weeks.' Ed laughed at the prediction, but was sure broken up when, ten days later, a very dear girl-friend was hurt in an automobile wreck and died in his arms at the Receiving Hospital."

"That was queer, wasn't it?"

"Do you believe it?"

"Oh, yes—I've had experiences that way."

"Good. I'll tell Eric von Stroheim about you sometime. . . . Ever hear of a drugstore cowboy, John?"

"No—I can't say that I have."

"Well let's stop in here, and you can watch some of them riding the leather-cushioned stools while I phone to Lira."

We go into one of the chain drug and sandwich shops

at the corner of Vine Street, where two well known syrup-shooters are playing tricks with lime freezes and choc malts, doing everything with the Chinese eggs except giving themselves a shampoo; the one with the marcel narrowly missing the other boy's permanent wave with every pass, and vice versa, as the acidosis liquids are shot to their destinations. John watches the performance while I step into a telephone booth and call the W. U. R. Studio.

"This is Jack Warde speaking. Will you connect me with Miss Morgan please."

"Sorry, but she's in conference with Mr. Zerensky."

"Is that any reason why I can't speak to her?"

"Just a minute, please. . . . Who did you say was speaking?"

"Warde—Jack Warde."

"Thank you. I'll tell her you're on the line."

There is a brief wait, after which the characteristic secretarial whine is heard once more.

"Mr. Warde, Miss Morgan asks me to please have you leave a number where she can reach you in a very few minutes."

"This is a public phone, so don't let her forget. Hempton 1241."

"Thank you, I won't." . . .

"I sent for you," says Zerensky, "to talk about your option. It expires this week, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Lira replies flatly.

"I suppose you're anxious to have us take it up—at a nice increase in salary?"

"How much?"

"Well—that depends."

Lira surveys the ivory-faced, ferret-eyed little Pole with a look that tells him nothing and expects nothing.

"I'm listening," she says, with a faint, contemptuous smile.

"Same contrac' we always have, of course—marriage clause and everything. But we like you, and now mebbe the salary is twelve hundred—I said mebbe."

Zerensky grins a little, a joyless, wolf-like smirk.

"I don't see why you should worry about a marriage clause, Mr. Zerensky."

"Don't we always? We must protect ourselves. . . . Nice-looking boy you were with at Henry's last night. Is it some man from back home, uh? Oregon, mebbe?"

"What would you say if I told you he was from the stage?"

"Anyway, that doesn't matter. . . . *Is* he an actor?"

"Good-looking all right, as you say. But I've only known him a few days and haven't found out just what experience he's had."

"Like him a little, Lira?"

"We won't go into that, Mr. Zerensky."

"I don't mean to butt in—you must remember I pay

you pretty good money—and if I raise your salary I have to be sure you don't lose none of your value with the public. That's why I couldn't have you marry somebody, you understand?"

She makes no reply to this, and he adds: "A thousand to start, for three years, or twelve hundred to start, for five years. Two hundred a week raise each year. Is it a bargain?"

Lira lights a cigarette without offering one to her antagonist or receiving the offer of a light from him. Careless as she allows her mother to be with money when it is earned, valueless as she has found it herself, she has learned not to show either haste or gratitude in any offer that ever comes from the Zerenskys.

"I've been thinking of free-lancing, but I'd like a day or two to consider your proposition," she says finally.

"Sure. Suppose you talk it over with your mother and see me at noon the day after to-morrow. Mebbe we all lunch together, uh?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll decide this time for myself."

The near relative of brother fox secretly spears her with an icy glance.

"You're right. I want you should, Miss Morgan. Day after to-morrow, then, at noon."

★ ★ ★

. . . While we are waiting for Lira to call back, I find an opportunity to introduce John to another full-time soldier of the big war—Franz Dulgar, a musician from Vienna, now playing string bass in a Hollywood radio orchestra.

"Nervous, artistic-looking chap," John remarks as the other leaves us. "It was exceptionally tough on fellows like him."

"Yes—victim of shell-shock—keeps himself up, he says, with anything and everything alcoholic that he can get in an arid country. Franz was a captain on the Isonzo front, and one of his lieutenants was no other than Fritz Kreisler. Kreisler bought a squeaky fiddle for what would be two bits in our money, at some little village, and Dulgar got hold of a guitar. Franz says the two of them used to play for the boys in their dugouts at night till everybody'd be sitting around more or less in tears, including Kreisler himself. . . ."

The summons that comes presently over the telephone is rather unexpected.

". . . Jack, meet me alone at the studio—bring something to eat, and we'll sit somewhere in your car. Ask John to call you here, in an hour—I want to talk to you first alone."

"Speak to him yourself, will you?"

"No—do as I say."

So I give John his orders, which he accepts without question, and leaving him under fire of the d. s. c.'s,

hasten to another drugless apothecary's for the lunch which I don't want him to know I'm to share with Lira.

"Well, what's it all about?" I demand. "Something happened?"

"What *is* this—peanut butter? You *would* buy peanut butter." She takes off a life-sized bite, however, and I can see she isn't going to take time to chew it.

"Now, look," she gasps, "you'll say I'm crazy, but something's due to explode, and it might as well be you. Zerensky wants to renew my option, from twelve hundred up—five years——"

"Good!" I exclaim.

"Wait—but no husbands. . . . Twenty-five and five are thirty, aren't they?"

"What of it?"

"Just this much—I'm not going to sign it—I'll be damned if I am!"

"Would you if Massey hadn't come along?"

"I don't know. But everything's different now."

She has stopped eating. I get her started again.

"See here, Lira. How do you know John wouldn't—understand?"

She makes sure of my meaning, then looks off among the trees on Romaine Street and says wistfully: "Oh, Jack, if only he would."

"Why don't you try him?"

This sends her into a silent conference with her many other selves, and I await the verdict. Now she speaks calmly, slowly:

"It would have been so much easier if it hadn't been for——"

She lets the sentence go unfinished.

"Leave Tony out of it, Lira—be sensible, will you?"

"He's in it—I don't know why, but he's in it. I believe I'll ask John, just the same.... Yes.... I'll ask him.... I'll ask him just the same."

"Then what?"

"I wish I knew.... He's great, isn't he? Don't you honestly think so yourself?"

"I like him a little more than I'd tell you, Lira."

"He's smart, too, isn't he?—I don't mean smarty, I mean—he savvies things."

"That's it, I guess—he savvies. I suppose he reads a lot—but aside from all that—he recalls to me what Tolstoy said about some of the peasants on the Russian steppes. They never saw a newspaper, never went to a city, had no books or associations with informed people —yet they understood, they saw into life, knew what it was all about."

"That's how I feel about John.... Come on, let's go —I'm anxious to see him.... When he calls, tell him to come down, and bring him on the set."

"I don't know just what you figure this little story-

conference has accomplished, Lira—but if you're taking heart from my passiveness maybe I'd better remind you that I was born this way."

"I don't always talk to you to hear what *you*'ll say. Sometimes it's to know what *I*'m trying to say—to myself."

"I'll have a still made of me—it might save me a lot of gas."

The impressive main entrance of the W. U. R. Studio Corporation impresses my companion, John Massey, of Alberta, Canada, about as much as the Eiffel Tower must have done, on a two-day leave. He does, however, take an interest in the gateman. Is he somebody's father? What hours does he work? Does he make enough to live on, and is he any surer of his job than an actor, for instance?

The double rows of sound-stages, resembling as they do immense granaries, get a rise out of John, and when we halt at Stage No. 5, forbidden by a red light to enter, he almost threatens to become alert. The light goes off, and we start through a padded passageway, opening door after door thick with soundproofing, until we emerge from under a mass of scaffolding and stand behind the cameras. The set, a living-room interior, is still lighted by two or three Kliegs, and the assistant director, Clank Wales, is running through his script with two male members of the cast, while the director and

Lira sit chatting with backs toward camera in foreground.

"The skinny little guy with the two men," I explain to John, "is Clank Wales, assistant to Welkin, the director—the fellow with Lira."

"I suppose," says John, "the director is giving her instructions about the story?"

"More likely relating some clever thing he said to Will Rogers on the Fox lot last week—or telling Lira how gorgeous she'll be when he has found the proper story-setting for her exotic beauty. . . . I'll let her know we're here."

"Let's try the rehearsal," the director speaks.

"All on for rehearsal," shouts Clank.

"Light 'em up," calls first camera.

"We'll have to wait till this is over, John."

Fifty or more lights flood the scene as Lira rises and moves to center. The male star, Ross Pilberry, comes in from the wings, talking to himself; camera says, "Let's see it"; mixer says, "Sound O. K."; Clank bellows, "Quiet!"; sound says, "Speed!" and the mummers begin to move and talk.

They go over it several times, John, as far as I can see or hear, holding his breath.

"All right," says Welkin, "let's make it."

"Let's have the interlock," yells Clank. "Quiet!" No one breathes. "Speed!" The play is on. The first is N. G., the second a take.

"Rewinding," calls the close-up camera. "All right for the art study," bawls Clank. The "still" man runs up with his tripod. The still is taken. "Save your lights," shouts camera.

Pilberry puts an arm around Lira's shoulder and smiles into her face.

"Good-looking chap, isn't he?" John remarks casually.

"You'd think he was smiling at her, wouldn't you? He doesn't even know she's there—he's only exercising the muscles of his face."

Wales comes within speaking distance, and I hail him.

"Clank, meet Mr. Massey, a friend of mine."

"Howdy," says Clank with a friendly grip.

"Tell Lira she has company, will you?"

"Yeh. . . . What do you think of this big fluff, Jack?"

"He'll do. He's bad enough."

"Sez me too. One of Louie's favorite poisonalities."

"He means Pilberry," I explain, as Clank goes toward Lira.

At this moment there is a stir on the set, occasioned by the arrival of Zerensky and two or three of his yes-men. They cross toward the director, who has joined Pilberry and Lira. Clank reaches her at the same moment as the others, and without any ceremony whatever she quits the huddle and comes to John. Zerensky glares after her a moment, then turns to Welkin and the male star, keeping an eye on us all the time, however.

"Hello, John!"

"Hello, Lira!"

She takes her eyes off him long enough to notice my grin.

"That's the only effective dialogue I've heard since we came on the set."

Lira laughs a little.

"We won't let him kid us, will we?"

"Are you going to introduce John to Louis the Punk?"

"Don't worry—he'll be over, when he finds we're not running after him. . . . What do you think of this nice big padded cell, John?"

"I wouldn't have believed it took so many men and cameras and lights—and so much time—and everything—to make a picture—and it goes so *slow*, doesn't it?"

"It's a slow life, if you ask me," says Lira. "What's exciting about it?"

"You have to think," John ventures, "of how much fun you're making for us folks away out in the tall grass."

"Why should we make fun for you? You have it all already."

When Lira talks to him and looks at him this way I realize that I'll never be a sensation as a story-writer. There's nothing much I can do on paper with what's passing between these two.

"You guessed right, Lira—here he comes."

Zerensky has obviously paid no more attention to

what his best friends have told him than he has to a vegetable diet. It is hardly so killing, at that, as the glance I get from Lira.

"Yes, Miss Morgan has told me about you, Mr. Massey, but she doesn't say if you are an actor?"

"Oh, no, I'm not an actor," says John.

Lira signals him to let it go at that.

"When are we to see that new story you promised us, Warde?"

"Just as soon as you can take a day off, Mr. Zerensky, and go through that pile of scripts on your desk—it's been there now for about two months."

"Is that so? I apologize—I'll have my secretary find it at once."

"Fine, but for my sake, don't have him read it."

"It's a she, Warde."

"Now, now, Zerensky, if I know about anything I know about sex. I said don't let *him* read it."

"Oh, I got you." He motions me aside, excusing himself to Lira.

"Is this fella Massey an old friend of hers, mebbe?"

"I never met him till to-day at noon."

". . . Warde. . . . I've offered to take up her option at a mighty big figger, and she hesitates. It must be some guy, mebbe this one, uh? Do what you can with her. I'll find your story, don't worry. I like your stuff very much." . . . He's a liar. . . . "These feature players like Miss Morgan—I seen 'em before—they go and fall in

love at the worst times—I don't say she's in love—but if she's stuck on that fella we might get him some little job so we can watch him. If she wants to live with him, O. K.—she's a damn fool, but that's her business. Only she don't get no contract if she marries him. . . . She'll soon get sick of him on a little job, a hundred a week."

The routine is heralded again, by the boisterous Clank; lights, rehearse, interlock, turn 'em over, speed, grind—cut.

"How would you like to work around a place like this, John?"

He smiles and shakes his head.

"Not even for a hundred a week?"

"With a fair season I do as well as that on the ranch. But even in a bad year, there's a living—and I suppose these boys are liable to be laid off any time, aren't they?"

"Well, when they come to work at eight in the morning they're fairly sure of their pay up until six that night."

"Of course," says John, "if a person were at the top, like Lira, it would be different. You could stay at it a few years and then retire."

"You mean—stay at it till you *couldn't* retire. . . . How about a job in the office?"

"I'd dry up and blow away in an office. No—I don't think any of this would tempt me a bit."

Lira is up against it with this boy. You can't fool

him, and you can't do anything with him. He is one of those happy creatures who know what they want and how to get it. . . . But what about this film celebrity he wants? He knew when he saw her on the screen that she was it—knew, when he met her, what to say and how to say it. Will he know his way when the moment comes to leave her? Probably will. But Lira—she's the one I'm worrying about. Jane and I have always been able to kid her out of the wobbly infatuations that have come along. This is different. She said I might tell Jane, but warned me not to repeat to her anything Jane might say unless it were encouraging. Lira has without doubt set her heart on the Canadian. Zerensky can sign me on a long-term writing contract, or he can take a jump in the Los Angeles river bed. Any move I make between these two lucky idolaters is going to come natural.

A few hours behind schedule, as Lira calculated, the machinery doesn't get to the clinch scenes between the two leads by five o'clock.

"You don't get to see me to-morrow," she tells John, "because we wallow all over the place. And I know very well you wouldn't want to see me kiss him, would you, John?"

"Well, of course," says John, "if I could afford it I'd rather pay for the scene myself and have it done to me —but think how they'd yell 'cut'!"

Lira laughs and annoys me with a glance which says: "Isn't he cute?"

A stenographer accosts her with a slip of paper.

"Your mother wants you to call this number right away, Miss Morgan."

"Let's all go over to the Wigwam—I'll call her from there."

"My dear, has it never occurred to you at any time during the last few days that I may somewhere have a wife waiting for me?"

"And what a break for me," says Lira.

"How about you, John?—I'll be seeing you again before you go, won't I?"

"You bet—I don't leave till to-morrow night, Jack."

"You said two days!" Lira puts in excitedly.

"I know. That was last night, Lira."

"Oh, my god," she whimpers, "has a whole day gone already!"

John and I laugh spontaneously. . .

Ellen is met by a look of distinct disappointment as Lira appears in the open doorway of the Wigwam.

"Oh, John—don't come in—Ellen isn't dressed."

This is pure fiction—Ellen is wearing the heaviest summer suit she possesses. However, she makes a quick exit to her bedroom, pausing only long enough for a few facial antics expressive of distrust.

"The coast is clear now," Lira announces, turning toward the door and standing her ground. John pauses and smiles faintly, but instead of kissing her, reminds

her of the urgent telephone call left at the studio.

"You'd think it was *your* telephone call?"

John drops on one knee, in imitation of Ross Pilberry, and kisses her hand.

"Now will you do it, O Queen?—Is it not from your mother, the Dowager?"

Lira sits on the bended knee and takes a grip on his thick hair.

"How did *you* know she was a dowager?"

"I'll bet she's just fine."

"She's even more spoiled than I am, John—but I suppose I have to call her, anyway."

The other end of the line is obviously displeased.

"I called you just as soon as I could, Mother. . . . Oh . . . so he got in touch with you, too, uh? . . . He what? . . . Well, my dear, isn't a person entitled to at least a day or two to think things over? . . . Of *course* I intended to discuss it with you. . . . He only *spoke* to me this noon. . . . I'm at the Wigwam. . . . Please don't get all worked up over it—I'm on my way there now. . . . Well, I *tried* to tell you, Mother. . . ."

Lira abruptly hangs up and sits for a moment speechless.

John waits.

"It's been like this for years . . . every day . . . something. . . . How I've hoped—and prayed—to get away from it. Money, arguments, hysterics—hysterics, argu-

ments, money. Oh, I *hate* this life. . . . John, you don't know how blessed you are."

"Have I been monopolizing you, Lira? Is that the trouble?"

Her posture, her gestures, are convincing.

"You? You're the only—only fun I've had in years—years."

"Maybe if I went along with you your mother wouldn't quarrel with you. You're tired—I can see you need rest—and no wonder, after all that labor to-day."

He pauses. She is crying. He crosses to her and half smilingly starts to soothe her, as though she were a youngster.

"Now, look here—that won't do."

He stands holding her, waiting for her to look at him. She continues to feel badly, so he sits down with her and says:

"You need a vacation. Bring your mother and come on away up and see me."

"I'd have a hell of a time with her along," Lira sobs, and John laughs aloud.

"That's the girl—get it off your chest."

He continues to chuckle until the weeping spell has pretty much subsided.

"I hope you won't think me an idiot, John. I'm sorry you caught me being myself like this. But I guess I'll just have to tell you. Zerensky, the producer you met to-day, wants to renew my option. I was to have two

days to think it over. He wants me to agree not to marry for five years—can you feature that?—five years—and who wants a girl of thirty?"

John begins to look serious.

"I didn't know they expected things like that of you."

"They expect your time, your life, your blood, and your virtue."

"And after giving you time to think it over, he called your mother, eh?"

"Yes, and who knows what he told her? You should have heard her on that phone. Zerensky has her scared to death—she thinks I've decided to break up her bridge gambling parties and hire some gangster to take her for a ride. He may even have told her about seeing me with *you*—at Henry's."

"Did she mention that?"

"I didn't give her much chance. She's sitting there now, waiting for me. . . . John, you're a cool-headed person. If you were in my place—hated your surroundings—despised the men who paid you big money—and saw your own mother getting weak and selfish and hateful from having this money to spend—if you felt down in your heart that the decent, natural thing to do would be to quit cold—do you think you'd have the nerve to do it?"

An immediate answer is not forthcoming. By and by John says:

"I don't know, Lira. . . . I'd like to meet your

mother. She's expecting you—why not go and see her together?"

She looks at him expectantly, almost eagerly.

"Why? What could we say—together?"

"Well, she has certain rights. Suppose we told her that we are—am I allowed to say—attracted to each other? Suppose we made a bargain with her—that you stay in pictures, say, two more years—then do as you like?"

"We'd never get past the first hemorrhage. No, John—I can see you don't get just the angle on Mother. . . . Listen here—if I take you with me—introduce you as a member of our cast—and give you a chance to see my mother more or less as she is, will you promise to say nothing about any friendship between us?"

"If you wish it. But, you know, I love you, Lira, and I feel that it's up to me to help you in some way."

"You help me most by just being you."

She smiles, and John says: "I'll go along, then, if you think you need me, and do whatever you say."

"Grand. That's the first time you've really yessed me! As a matter of fact, I don't think you'll be any good to me, but it will be so nice to have you to look at between rounds."

"And so nice to have you do it," he returns gallantly.

"Look here," Lira demands with a nasty frown, "where did you learn them drawing-room manners?"

"From Ross Pilberry, dawling, this awfte'noon."

Ellen hears them laughing as they go out to the front balcony and down the stairs.

Lira skids her roadster into the curb, in front of a nine-room hacienda north of Santa Monica Boulevard in Beverly Hills. A Pierce-Arrow town car stands in the driveway beside the house.

"This is it," she says, and at the sound of her voice a colored chauffeur bounds from the Pierce and comes to the curb, too late, however, to open the door of the roadster for her.

"That's all right, Jesse," she says.

"Thank you," replies Jesse, and hurries to open the front door for her.

The chauffeur is again anticipated, however, this time by Maria Griffith herself. The movie-mother fills the doorway with agitative vibrations.

"Well, Lira Morgan, it's about time you got here. I thought you'd got into a crash or something—I——"

She breaks off, as she realizes that her daughter has an escort. Lira waits until the sputtering stops, then presents John.

"Mr. Massey's been on the set with me—he's a wonderful dialogue coach."

"Oh, how interesting. So glad to know you, Mr. Massey."

"Thank you," murmurs John, ill at ease for the first time since meeting the screen star.

The large living room is somewhat overfurnished, as Lira has often maintained, but the ottoman, the deep divan, the hassocks, and the oriental hangings on the mission walls—these and other things, including a plaque or two, lend a distinct charm to the place. To John it is rich, elaborate, and a trifle disconcerting.

"I like the Wigwam better," Lira whispers to him. observing that he is taking note of the room.

"I didn't know you had a chauffeur," he whispers back with unconscious irrelevancy.

The two other occupants of the hacienda, Mrs. Tate, Lira's aunt, and Bob Tate, a young man of twenty, Aunt Julia's son, come in for introductions, which are just concluded when Maud Handley, a magazine writer, clamors for admittance. At this moment the phone rings, and K M T R broadcasting station wishes to know if Miss Morgan will say a word or two at ten o'clock with Ross Pilberry on a coast hook-up. Bob butts in, advising Lira to lay off the radio broadcasts unless there's money in it. This precipitates a discussion, and while everybody, except Lira, is talking, Mrs. Griffith says aside to John:

"Are you quite sure Mr. Zerensky didn't send you along with Miss Morgan to help her make up her mind?"

John's glance automatically flashes to Lira, bringing her to his aid. Lira hardly expected her mother to harpoon the "dialogue coach" so early in the hunt.

"I—er—I saw Mr. Zerensky only a few minutes to-day," John manages.

"You mustn't expect Mr. Massey to know everybody on the lot, Mother—he hasn't been there long."

"Have you told him you're going to sign with W. U. R. for another five years?"

"No—but I have told him I'd rather take a chance as a free-lance."

"Free-lance!" exclaims Mrs. Griffith, beginning to get red in the face—"another word for being on the outside looking in!"

Mrs. Tate is disposing of the magazine reporter with a promise that Miss Morgan will give her an interview to-morrow. Bob is making suggestions as to how to write it up. The fan writer is gushing. Mrs. Griffith is heard above them all.

"Lira Morgan is Lira Morgan, but W. U. R. is W. U. R., and if Louis Zerensky gets it into his head that W. U. R. and Lira Morgan and Lira Morgan and W. U. R.——"

"Excuse me, Mother. Sit down and relax a moment with Mr. Massey—I'll be right back."

"That's how she always does—she runs away—you can't pin her down——"

"Yes, Mother!"

Lira smiles sweetly over her shoulder and disappears into the next room.

"Now, Mr. Massey, forgetting that I'm Miss Mor-

gan's mother, don't you think Miss Morgan is a very foolish girl to turn down a five-year contract?—I'm speaking to you as an executive—a writing executive, are you not?—You probably know Louis Zerensky better than you're willing to admit to us—but after all is said and done, isn't twelve hundred a week sixty-thousand a year—and five times sixty—three hundred thousand you're absolutely sure of—better than worrying about sweet parts?"

"Twelve hundred a week?" John repeats incredulously.

"Didn't you know? Don't you think it's a very nice little contract? Of course, Miss Morgan is worth more—Lira Morgan is worth more, everybody knows that—but, nevertheless, with all these New York stage women bidding for parts, it's no time to be talking of free-lancing, and as for kicking about the marriage clause in the contract, it's absolutely ridiculous, because Miss Morgan doesn't have to worry about husbands, thank God. Now what do *you* think, Mr. Massey?"

"I had heard they paid big money," says John somewhat absently, "but I didn't know——"

"W. U. R., you mean? Haven't you been with them long?"

"O—oh, no," John replies uneasily. "Of course, as you say, she's worth it—she's the best of them all."

"That's what one of the critics often says—— But here she comes. Remember, you're on my side."

While Bob is heard at the phone, announcing that Miss Morgan is not in, and his mother, through the patio door, is giving the colored chauffeur directions to wipe off Miss Morgan's roadster, Mrs. Griffith begins her assault on Lira Morgan as a free-lance.

"And Mr. Massey fully agrees with me," she concludes.

"Did he say so or did you, Mother?"

John meets the mother's eyes fairly. "I didn't say so, Mrs. Griffith."

"But you do?"

"I can't say that I do. I think there are some things we must all decide for ourselves—and after getting a glimpse of the—strenuous life your daughter is obliged to lead, I'd say that to know in advance that there'd be no let-up for five years might be enough to break her down completely."

The movie-mother is flabbergasted. People don't talk to her this way. Who is this fellow, anyway?

"Nonsense," she retorts.

"Do you know why he understands pictures so well, Mother?—Because he was in the trenches." There is a flippant sarcasm in the tone. "If you'd known when you first went in, John, that the shootin' would last four years——"

Mrs. Griffith looks from one to the other of them slowly.

"How long have you known Mr. Massey, Lira?"

"Longer than anybody in Hollywood, Mother."

"Don't tease her, Lira," John unexpectedly intervenes. "No—we've only been acquainted a short while."

Surprised, Lira wonders how much further he intends to go. Her mother is suddenly struck by a thought.

"It must have been you that Mr. Zerensky saw with Miss Morgan at Henry's the other night, then?"

"Yes," says John unhesitantly.

"I thought he'd have to tell you about that," says Lira. "I'm surprised you didn't spring it on us before, Mother!"

"What about it? Mr. Zerensky didn't say anything—just casually mentioned it."

"Yes, I know how casual he can be. I suppose he casually hinted that we might even grow fond of each other and want to get married and bust his one-sided contract? Well, if he mentions it again, tell him something for me, will you? Tell him with my compliments to go plumb to *hell*—and that I'll sign with him when I get damned good and ready!"

"Oh, now, Lira," says John calmly, "please don't do this—it only upsets you both. . . . I can see your mother's side of it, too."

Whenever John talks like this Lira wants to cry, but now she manages not to do it by remaining speechless a moment.

"It seems to me, Mrs. Griffith, that Zerensky's proposition is very unfair."

"Why is it, Mr. Massey?" The tone is incisive.

"Because a temperament like Lira's can't stand the thought of bondage—and that's what it is—a sort of slavery."

"It's nothing of the sort. She has a lovely home, oodles of clothes and spending money, two cars, a chauffeur, popularity—what more could she want?"

"But these aren't the things she longs for. Don't you understand, Mrs. Griffith?"

"No, I do *not* understand—and if you'll pardon my saying so, Mr. Massey, in view of the fact that you've evidently been going around with her behind my back——"

"Mother!"

"—it's a little unusual, to say the least, for you to start advising me, who got her in pictures and has kept her in pictures——"

"You!"

"—especially as you don't seem to have made any name for yourself, as far as I can remember——"

Lira breaks in excitedly.

"Let's get out of here, John—I knew it would end this way—it always does!"

"Wait, dear. . . . Your mother has the wrong impression of me. I know how you feel, Mrs. Griffith. It's been partly my fault, too—I shouldn't have let Lira introduce me as a studio man—I'm not in pictures——"

"Not in pictures!"

"John!"

"No—and rather glad of it. From what little I've seen, it's a good business to stay away from. But I want you, as her mother, to know that I love Lira—and yet don't intend to marry her."

Lira greets this news with silent consternation.

"I knew it," cries the movie-mother. "I knew there was a love affair in it. She didn't hesitate about signing her *last* contract!"

"Oh, let's forget it, please—you heard him say he didn't intend to marry me. I've always known he wouldn't—and he'll want to still less when he knows—more about me."

John takes hold of her hand, as he would a kid's, and without any sign of a hangover from the insults so recently implied says to her mother:

"I had invited her out to dinner with me. Please don't think any more about it to-night. To-morrow maybe you can both go to Zerensky and get him to modify that contract a little."

"But I don't want it modified—it's good enough for me—and as for Miss Morgan marrying, it doesn't go with a great career, anyway."

"Great bologny!" says Lira, in disgust, squashing a cigarette butt in an ash tray.

"What is your line of business, Mr. Massey?"

"Don't tell her, John—it's none of her business!"

"I'm a rancher, from western Canada," says John simply.

"A farmer! . . ." murmurs the wife of a former dry-land rancher, sitting weakly on the ottoman.

"Yes, and barely makes expenses," observes Lira. "Come on, Massey, I'm hungry."

"Good-night," says John, extending his hand. "I hope I'll see you again before I leave."

"Leave?"

"Yes—I'm going back to Canada to-morrow night."

Slowly the mother smiles.

"It's been *so* nice to meet you. I hope the price of wheat will come up again. Good-night."

"Oh, god," Lira murmurs, as she goes out, followed by what is left of the Albertan.

The movie-mother summons her sister. "Get Louis Zerensky on the phone, Julia, at his residence. If he isn't there, try the Ambassador. Wheat farmer! For god's sake!"

The W. U. R. executive is finally located at a relative's near Sears-Roebuck's retail store on Santa Monica Boulevard.

"This is Mrs. Griffith, Mr. Zerensky. Is there any chance in the world of changing that marriage clause in my daughter's contract? . . . Oh—well—I'm tickled to death. I don't *want* it changed. . . . You stand your ground, and I'll see that she signs. . . . Thank you.

Good-bye. . . . Julia, listen. If she doesn't come home by one o'clock to-night, tell the chauffeur to be ready to take me out. I'll go to the Wigwam, and if this Massey is there with her, I'll tell him she's already engaged to Tony Devereaux."

Mrs. Tate doesn't think Lira would take him to the hideout. Besides, if she did, Ellen's there.

"That's why she'd take him. You don't think Lira would do anything wrong, do you?"

"Certainly not."

"Just the same," says the mother, "I've often wondered just how far she went with that Devereaux punk. God, but what a narrow escape *that* was—and did I have to fight?"

"This young man seems—nice, somehow."

"He's *too* nice. Poor as a peon, too. And the little idiot thinks she loves him. Did you see how she looked at him?"

Mrs. Tate sighs deeply.

"You think he's nice, eh? Trouble with you is that you smell the sagebrush on him, and it makes you homesick. . . . Mix up a highball, will you?—I've had a damnable day."

"John, can you cook a steak?"

"Sure. Can't you?"

"What if I couldn't?"

"Then I'd cook it."

"Here's a market—you sit in the car, and I'll get something. I don't feel like going to a restaurant."

"Same here. But you know, Miss Morgan, I can't let Lira Morgan buy groceries, Miss Morgan."

"Be yourself, you baboon."

However, John clamps her to the seat and goes into the market himself, returning quickly with an armful of stuff.

"I thought I'd get enough for your roommate, too."

"She won't be there—it's her swimming night. Besides, she's making herself scarce these days."

"On your orders, I suppose?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing—only life and death."

"Yes—you sound like it."

John finds her free hand and holds it the rest of the way to the Wigwam.

The cattle rancher, however, makes the mistake of putting a pair of thick T-bones into a cold skillet.

"Why, John, don't you know any more about steak than that!"

"Maybe I wanted to see if you did!"

"Well, are you satisfied?"

"Your accomplishments stun me. I believe I'll have to lie down."

"Say, what makes you so gay?—I'll bet you're not

going back to Canada at all. I'll bet you've made some connection here—haven't you, now?"

He shakes his head, his foolishness visibly subsiding.

"Do you know why I'm happy?"

"Tell me."

"Because I shot it out with your mother. Because there are twenty-four hours in a day. And because I know that you know just how I feel about you."

"You could have knocked me over, John, when you told her what you really are. Didn't you ever pretend anything in your whole life?"

"Yes—I pretended to myself once that I had no notion of going to Hollywood to meet you. I pretended I wouldn't be surprised to find you sweet and unspoiled."

"Do you really—find me—like that?"

He nods quickly and turns to the skillet.

"Darned if I can keep from making love to you. I do it every minute, don't I? It must get monotonous to you."

"It does—when you don't follow it up."

She turns and sees his body jiggling against the skillet as he laughs to himself.

"You hard-hearted brute—how's the steak coming?"

"It seems to be suffering, but I don't think it has given up yet."

"Oh, quit—I won't be able to eat it."

★ ★ ★

It was a good guess. Lira leaves most of the meat, some of the vegetables, a little of the dessert, and all of the dishes. John coaxes her to let him wash them, but she stands pat.

"There's something worse than dishes. I've got to tell you about my past."

"Who cares about pasts?" says John, forgetting to light a cigarette as they sit on the sofa.

"If you don't you'll be the first one who ever didn't."

"We all have 'em, I guess," is his answer to that.

Lira glances at him quickly. "John, tell me something. . . are you married?"

"Gosh, no! What put that into your head?"

"It just struck me for a minute—do I look scared?"

"I believe you do."

She resorts to the familiar manual of toying with his fingers.

"Wouldn't it be awful if we'd both been married when we met as we did?"

"Don't you know that there aren't any 'ifs'?"

"Aren't there? Isn't there any—not even one little one—about your going home to-morrow?"

"You don't think it's fun for me, do you?"

"And you're really going?"

"I must . . . you see that, don't you?"

"I thought maybe when you got a few whiffs of my home atmosphere you'd feel like leaving me some of your clear Canadian air—a while longer."

"I know how stifling you must find it, Lira. If I were in a position equal to your own I'd yank you away from all this business so quick they'd never see you go."

This remark thrills her, or she wouldn't sit so still.

"Why don't you say something?" John asks, after a considerable silence.

"I was just thinking."

"Of what?"

"Of several things, one of which was that I'm really an old-fashioned person after all."

"Why?"

"Because I want to tell you something about myself that a thoroughly modern girl would probably feel like passing over."

She seems serious. Tactfully he waits for her to go on.

"John, what would you say if I told you that I *had* been—married?"

It doesn't seem to paralyze him. His tone, in fact, sounds quite normal as he raises his brows and says: "Honestly?"

Lira meets the friendly expression with a look of surprise.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"Not after I get my breath, maybe. Is he—is he still living?"

"Yes."

"Divorced?"

"No—that wasn't necessary."

"Wasn't——? I don't quite——"

"There was no ceremony—his picture contract wouldn't permit that. I thought we loved each other, so we just decided to postpone the ceremony awhile."

"And you found out he—wasn't there, eh?"

"Worse than that—he—he was all sour. I don't like to talk about him—but I wanted you to know. And I want you to know his name—it was Tony Devereaux."

After what seems to Lira like a long interval, he slips an arm around her waist and pats her side, impersonally.

"I know how it works . . . we have to have *some* love in this world. . . . You had it all over me, Lira."

She glances at him with quick alarm—he doesn't look as though he meant that.

"Before our second fight at Ypres—remembering the first, we didn't figure there'd ever be a third—I met a little French girl. She was cute, I guess, and seemed to prefer me to some of the other fellows. Well, to everybody's surprise, including hers, I came back again. I'd have married her, I expect—the only thing was—a Scotch sergeant had gotten there ahead of me. . . ."

The voice that answers him is rather feeble.

"Why do you say I had it all over you, then?"

"You figured you were as good as married. *I* didn't—although I'd probably have come through later if it hadn't been for Scotland."

"You just tell me this," says Lira, without her usual

poise, "to make me feel better. You don't even ask me about him."

"Maybe I know enough now—the poor idiot—giving up a girl like you. . . . I shouldn't say 'like you.'" He draws her closer to him. "There aren't any like you, honey—never will be. You know I mean that, don't you?"

"John—do you—do you really love me—after all that?"

"Better not do that, dear—I want you bad enough without your coaxin' me. A fellow can only stand so much, you know."

"If this is the real you, John—and I almost wish it wasn't—I'm going to have you. Whatever else happens, I'm going to have you."

"That expresses my own agony to a 'T.'"

"Does it, honest? Oh, please tell the truth."

"Even worse." And he heaves a sigh.

"Well—what are we going to do about it?"

"Just wait, I guess. I have a feeling that something is going to happen."

"That doesn't sound like you—to sit down and *wait* for things to happen, John."

"No, sir, it doesn't, does it? Give you my word it's the first time I've ever been this way, too."

"Where do you expect to *do* all this waiting?"

"The ranch," he replies, with a slow, tantalizing air, "is just about eighteen miles from a town called Red Deer."

Lira moves away from him.

"I don't like you when you're this way. You're almost as stubborn as my own mother."

"That's it," says John, rousing somewhat from his coma, "let's talk about your mother. . . . She certainly has her heart set on that big salary, hasn't she?"

"My predicament amuses you, doesn't it?"

"Oh, now, Lira . . . that isn't fair. Put yourself in my place. You heard what she said to me. I knew she'd say it—but I wanted you to hear it. You couldn't care about a man who'd try to run off with you to the North Pole, figuring all the time that you'd get tired of it and then he could come back and live off *you.*"

"Yes, but you'd never do that."

"I'll say I wouldn't."

"I mean—oh, what's the use? We always just go around in a circle."

The pauses, like financial depressions, seem to be getting longer each time.

"It just goes to prove I was right in wanting to beat it the first evening I came here."

She makes him look into her eyes.

"Don't say that."

He fails to resist the lure this time. Lira's eyes glisten.

"Isn't it hell?" she says muffledly, against him.

"It sure is," John whispers, "if it isn't heaven."

Lira wakes with a start. Someone is banging the door knocker repeatedly. She slips a robe on and goes to the

living room, trembling a little from the shock of the sudden awakening.

"Who is it?" she asks expectantly, switching on the light.

"You must be some sleeper," replies a well known voice.

Lira unfastens the door and retreats to the sofa, tiredly.

"I was sound asleep. What's all the row, Mother?"

Mrs. Griffith and her sister both look a trifle frustrated. The chauffeur didn't come up.

"Sorry if we disturbed you, but I wanted to fix my underskirt—we're going to the Brown Derby."

"Yes," adds the aunt, "won't you come along?"

"Do I look like I would?"

Mrs. Griffith goes in, presumably to the bathroom. When she comes out, which she does very soon, Lira says:

"Disappointed, Mother?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, no, you don't."

"Now, you two, don't go getting into an argument," pleads Aunt Julia.

"I suppose you thought you'd find us in a clinch—or maybe in bed together? Well—he's not that kind, even if I were."

"Maybe I'd rest easier if he was," Mrs. Griffith retorts.

"How do you figure that out?"

"Listen, Lira . . . you're not going to be damn fool enough to fall in love with this fellow, are you?"

"Mother, will you please run along and mind your own business?" Her voice threatens to ascend. "You'd drive a person crazy! What if I did want to marry him —do you think you'd stop me?"

"Lira," Aunt Julia interposes, with aggravating gentleness.

"Be quiet, Aunt, please!" Then to her mother: "I have to work to-morrow. I've got to have some rest. Are you going to leave me alone or stay here and nag me till I'm a wreck?"

"If you do anything foolish, Lira, you'll regret it the longest day you live. You can't fool me—I can see in your eyes that you're up to something. Don't be a fool. You've made a great success—if you throw it away on some nobody like this Massey and start free-lancing, you'll lose out in pictures as sure as you're alive. Look at all these other actresses who've done it—where are they now?"

"For God's sake, Aunt," Lira cries, in a voice ready to break, "will you take her home!"

With this Lira switches off the lights and escapes to her bedroom.

There, several minutes later, she hears the Pierce-Arrow drive away.

But sleep has been routed. She tosses and mumbles,

cries a little, swears a little, and finally gets up and locates the evening paper.

Propped up in bed she reads the headlines, tries to concentrate on an editorial, but fails, glances over the theatrical page, looks sadly at a few of the funnies, and is about to lay the paper down when a small boxed advertisement catches her eye.

GO BY AIR
ANYWHERE

You name the place,
We take you there.
In twos, threes or more,
Rates very fair.

REAGAN AIRPORT. Day or Night.
VE. 0110

She reads it again and sits cooped up, in a deep study. Then, with characteristic suddenness, she reaches for the telephone beside her bed and dials a number.

"Hello . . . Reagan Airport? . . . I want some information, please. . . . In a case of sickness or emergency how long does it take to get under way in one of your ships? . . . As soon as that? . . . Yes, indeed. . . . How long a flight could you make without landing? . . . You could! . . . How much a mile would it cost, say, for two people and a little baggage? Is that all? Well, now, listen—whom should I call if I needed you—maybe to-morrow

night—or the next night? . . . Smith . . . Billy Smith? . . . I have that. . . . From 7 P. M. to 4 A. M. . . . All right. . . . I might not need you at all, and yet again I might. . . . My name is—Tate. Lora Tate. Put that down, won't you?—so that you'll know me if I call. Thank you. Now, are you sure two hours' notice is enough? . . . That's fine. You may hear from me within twenty-four hours. Good-night, Mr. Smith, and please remember this is confidential. . . . Yes. . . . Good-night. . . ."

Lira tears the ad out of the paper and deposits it under her pillow; then, turning off the light, snuggles under the covers, determined not to think a single thought, but to rest up for the weasel-like Zerensky and his hawk-eyed cameras, whose meat must always be fresh.

. . . Jane turns down the gas under the Kaffee Hag and comes to tell me that I'm wanted on the phone.

"I wish Lira would marry that guy," I grumble, "and get it over with."

"It isn't Lira—unless she's so excited she forgot to say hello to me."

Reflecting that, after all, television will have its disadvantages, I sit down to the hall telephone with a groan, prepared for anything at all.

"Mr. Warde? Well, Jack, this is Mrs. Griffith. I apologize for calling you so early, but I was afraid you'd get away. I have a favor to ask of you. Louis Zerensky is

taking Lira and me to lunch with him this noon and asked me to invite you. You must come—we'll need you."

"Well, Mrs. Griffith," I lie stiltedly, "I'd sure like to oblige, but as a matter of fact I have another luncheon engagement."

"Please postpone it, can't you? This is serious, Jack. Now, keep it to yourself, but Lira is figuring on free-lancing and God knows what else—but she's got to sign up to-morrow with W. U. R., and I need you to help me."

Inevitably I am worn down and agree to go, realizing too that Lira may need my support. Queer she didn't call me herself!—I'll give her a buzz.

". . . Oh . . . hello . . . Lira?"

"No—this is Ellen. That you, Jack?"

"Yeh—has she left for work?"

"No—she got an early call from Canada and went to breakfast with him."

"Breakfast!"

"What do you think of that?"

"Unique. Must be tough on you, though."

"I don't even try to make this my headquarters lately. Just came in to get some things as you called."

"Well, thanks, Ellen—I'll see her at noon."

The place they call my office is a small bedroom of an ancient house, made over a trifle, but still possessed

of a bedroom atmosphere. When your cigarette burns low you instinctively look around for a washstand door and the receptacle inside. The only things I miss are the red-and-green carpet and the lace curtains.

Three gag men, Tom, Dick, and Harry, are engaged with me in mutilating the body of a once intelligent story, from which, in the natural course of events, the spirit fled at the first blow. By eleven o'clock we have become bored somewhat with the atrocity in hand and are preparing to turn on each other. I suddenly understand the impulses of the giant Negro pig-sticker who went crazy in a Boston abattoir some years ago and carved up a number of his collaborators.

I am calculating to a nicety just where to stab the handiest of the three, when a telephone call from Lira brings me to my senses and sends me to the floor in a heap, sobbing my heart out.

"What's the gag, Lira?—Can't the studio get it cashed for you?"

"Not this one—it's for my bank balance, and I want it in money."

"Must it be done before noon?"

"No, but I hear I'm to be at lunch with you, and it will save you getting off this afternoon."

"Well—O. K. It hurts me to leave my brethren just at this minute, but I think the carcass is down now to where they can handle it."

"Everything is in an envelope at the office. See you at noon."

"Yes—see me and explain."

Zerensky and Maria Griffith come on the set just as Lira has finished a scene and gotten me aside.

"What does this mean," I demand, "—an elopement?"

"Listen, Jack, I can't tell even you. But if I'm missing for a while, tell Mother you're getting me a contract—tell her anything—until the hysterics are over."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Does John know anything about this dough?"

"Not a thing."

"Is he still planning on going home to-night?"

"Yes—in his car."

"And you with him, eh? But, say, are you sure he'll stand for it?"

"Shush. Here's Jacob and Rachel." . . .

"Ah," grins Zerensky, "we're to have Mr. Warde, too. Very nice of you, Warde. Now, where will we go—for an hour?"

Lira's glance is calculated to disturb my solemnity. She has rarely looked prettier or more devilish.

"Fifty-five minutes," she corrects him: "five minutes are gone already."

"Then we better make it the Brown Derby, no?"

"Yes," agrees the mother.

A studio car gathers us up, and the barrage begins against poor Lira, who never looked less pitiable in her life.

It continues as the food is being served, persists through the dietetic feats of Louis and Maria, nor ends with the gustatory gasp with which Zerensky finishes his coffee.

Through it all Lira smiles and yesses him. How they can be so completely taken in by it is a mystery to me.

"Maybe we sign to-day and not wait till to-morrow, uh, Miss Morgan?"

"Oh, now, Mr. Zerensky, don't forget that it will take us till four o'clock to finish our retakes—Mr. Welkin says he *must* have them."

"She's right," Louis agrees, "Welkin impressed that on me himself. So we must be getting to the studio."

In the car, on our way back, however, he tries again.

"Maybe *after* four you feel like business, Lira?"

"Be careful, Mr. Zerensky," she smiles coyly; "if I think you're too anxious I may figure you're gypping me!"

Louis quickly licks his glistening lips, unnecessarily, and chuckles.

"Smaht, uh, Mama? She'll get ahead."

"With all due respect to you, though, Mr. Zerensky," the mother puts in, "I think we must have Mr. Warde

to thank for a little of the change in Lira's mind. If Miss Morgan would only tell the truth, I'll bet he's been working on her."

"He deserves to sell you a story, Mr. Zerensky," Lira suggests. "Don't you think?"

"He sure does—and that reminds me—come in at three o'clock, Warde, and I'll have a check for you."

"Fine. Do I adapt it, too?"

"Why not? Five hundred a week O. K.—four-week schedule?"

"I reckon."

"Good," says Lira. "Congratulations, Jack."

"And to-morrow," beams Mama, "it will be your turn to congratulate her!"

I wonder. . .

Promptly at four o'clock John presents himself at the information desk of the W. U. R. Studio and asks if Miss Morgan left instructions to admit him.

"Yes, Mr. Massey," says the switchboard girl importantly. "You'll find her on stage four."

John meets a stream of synthetic co-eds coming off a college picture and wonders if those college girls he saw at the Calgary Fair in 1929 were really as pretty as they seemed.

The red light at the entrance door of stage four is off, so he goes in, cautiously, as through barbed-wire entanglements, and making his way toward the deserted

cameras, looks around for Lira. A property boy hails him.

"Looking for Miss Morgan?—You Mr. Massey?"

"Yes."

"She said she'd be in her dressing room. Come on, I'll take you."

They start down the "company street," as John thinks of it, the boy sizing him up with a glance.

"Workin' in pitchers?"

"No."

"What a break!"

Banging on the door of a dressing room, the prop boy calls: "Here he is, Miss Morgan," and unceremoniously leaves.

"That you, John?" comes her voice from behind a lowered window shade.

"Yes, Lira."

"Just a minute, dear. Mind if I'm not all covered up?"

"I can stand it if you can."

The door opens immediately, and she smiles at him, not too personally, from behind a large towel and a few other things. A tile bathtub in one corner of the large dressing room, partially hidden behind a screen, explains her wet and slippery appearance.

"A minute sooner and you'd have caught a sea lion."

"Why not a nymph?"

"You're blushing," she laughs.

John grins sheepishly. The steamy, scented atmosphere affects his senses. Lira's eyes shine with amusement plus.

"Turn your back a minute now," she orders, "and it will be all over."

He obeys. Just what would she do if he played a mean trick on her? Yell, probably, and he'd be thrown out. What's he doing here in a movie actress's dressing room anyway? Is it all something he has dreamt, after seeing a picture at the Red Deer Theater? This lovely home-made girl who calls him "John" and talks so much about the simple life he leads on a remote ranch—surely this isn't the Lira Morgan, the Miss Morgan, and the Morgan whose name he hears on all sides, as a royal guard hears the name of his queen?

"Now you may look."

Even now it appears to be a trifle too soon for him. Lira chuckles, delighted at the effect on him, and going up to him brazenly catches his hands. John feels the muscles in his arms quiver and wonders if she notices it. She does.

"Gosh," he says, after a breathless pause, "you're beautiful!"

"I shouldn't have done this," she apologizes, too late, "but I wanted you to kiss me once, here in my dressing room, before you go away to Canada."

His face loses its glow for an instant, and taking sure

note of this, Lira silently thanks the dead Scotch-Irish-Welshman who gave her a will of her own and a little of recklessness along with it.

"Really going?" she asks, watching him still more closely.

"Let's not talk about it," he says. "We have a few hours yet."

"What dead-line have you set yourself?"

"Dead-line? Oh, yes . . . about twelve, I guess. You have to work to-morrow, you know."

. . . To-morrow! . . . Oh, thank the gods for to-morrow. . . .

It was agreed that they should lunch at twelve and dine at seven, but Zerensky's luncheon party intervened, which was just as well. Jacob and Rachel had to be disarmed at some moment of the day, and the sale of Jack's story had to be cinched—noon was as good a time as any. Now they can eat at five—that works out better; they won't be at the mercy of the airport lunch stand.

"Where's your car, John?" she asks him, as they start off the lot in her Marmon.

"In a garage, being greased. Would you like me to drive you around in it this evening, for a change? I had it polished in case you'd need it any time while I was here."

"No—if it wasn't polished I might consider it! . . ."

She pulls up at the entrance gate and hails the gateman.

"Good-night, Mac," she calls.

The old gateman, flattered at this special attention, almost overplays himself, especially as his foot slips off the curb when he reaches a second time for his cap.

"Do you always say good-night to him?" John asks, and she favors him with a somewhat scrutinizing glance as she replies: "When I think of it."

She says she wants to see Ellen a minute, but that he won't need to come up to the apartment with her—she'll only be a minute. Ellen, as she knows, will not be in, and the note she leaves is for another of her bodyguards, Maria Griffith. "Ellen, please deliver to mother," she scribbles on the back of the envelope.

When Lira returns to John and the roadster she is carrying a sealskin coat.

"It's easy to catch cold," she explains, "even in April, after being steamed in that dressing room—and besides, I have a little surprise for you, John."

"You always do have, Lira."

"How come?"

They drive slowly, relaxed and content, along a wavy asphalt street over which the tops of large pepper trees meet.

"Every time I see you you're so much more the vision I had than it's quite possible to believe."

"And yet you're going away from me."

"We don't have to think of ourselves as—divided, do we? We came together once—we will again—somehow. If I didn't feel sure of that I'd never be able to tear myself away. You know I wouldn't, Lira."

"What do you think will happen—that I'll finally lose out on the screen and flee to Alberta?"

"I can't picture you losing out at anything. You're too rare an article."

"I seem to be losing out on you."

Obviously this is making it rather tough for him.

"Lots of things might happen, Lira. You never know. I can wait for you—I'd feel *better* waiting for you. If I—had you all to myself now, I'd know I hadn't earned you. How could I, in so short a time?"

She brings the car to a stop, just off Holly Way, beside a large vacant lot covered with live oaks.

"You earned me," she says, "when you saw me on the screen and loved me enough to go out and find me—and you earned me again when you knew me after you did find me. How do you know you weren't earning me during all those months in the army?"

She thinks this ought to cheer him some, but its stimulating effect is negligible.

"What makes you so solemn?"

He does manage the imitation of a smile now.

"Maybe I'm jealous because you're so much better an actor than I am. I should put on a gay manner, too—shouldn't I?"

"You do know, then, that I don't feel as pert as I pretend, uh?"

"Well," he says slowly, "to tell the truth, Lira, I *know* you couldn't feel as bad as I do—you haven't as good a reason."

"If you figure I'm pretending, you must think I love you a little, after all, then . . . don't you?"

"It's going to take me still more time to really believe that."

"That's too bad, because it's so awfully, horribly true."

He studies her a moment, as though he seemed puzzled.

"At twelve to-night, when I shove off, will you tell me that and do your best to really make me believe it, dear?"

"Done," says Lira, offering her hand.

He takes it and kisses it in an easy manner, then says:

"Any appetite?"

"I'm full of 'em," she teases.

John laughs, almost embarrassedly.

"No wonder you entertain the public, Lira—at bottom you're the worst cut-up I've ever seen."

"Only at bottom?"

She screams a little, afraid that was going too far, and hides her face against the seat behind his shoulder. She feels John's body shaking, but when she reconnoiters his extremely pink face is painfully stern.

"Now that that's over," she says, "suppose we go back to the surprise I mentioned a while ago."

"You surprise me? You just tried it, didn't you?"

"Don't set me off again, please . . . aren't you curious?"

"I must admit I am."

"Well—I've a—friend who runs an airport, and he's going to take you and me up for a swoop to-night at eight o'clock. You'll come, won't you, John?"

"Do *you* want to?"

"Do I!"

"Well, if it's that bad—sure."

She clutches his arm gleefully. "You'd be game for anything, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe—if you were along."

"Remember you said that!"

John glances at her, a casual query. "What's that?"

"Some day I might hold you to it. . . . But, tell me, have you ever been in a plane?"

"I used to go up occasionally, near Paris, after the Armistice."

"I've been up a few times myself. Don't you think it's grand?"

"It will be to-night."

"Why?"

"It will be something more to remember."

"You bet it will. May I hang onto you tight?"

"You must . . . if it kills me."

"*Tonto!*" she laughs, soliciting what she gets. . . .

She makes him call at the garage where his car is being greased and get his overcoat, after which they find a secluded tea room, where Lira is happy not to be recognized. With her hat pulled well down over her eyes, she is able to avoid identification and at the same time dissect the soul of this Canadian Sir Launcelot for a last time.

"John," she says, with seeming mischievousness, "if things were different—if I had never gotten into this career business—but had met you as a stenographer or a waitress—would you have run away and left me like this?"

"You know very well I wouldn't."

"What would you have done—packed me in the Dodge and carried me off?"

"The very first day—if you'd have come."

"Where would we have been married?"

"Right here. You don't think——? Oh, go on, you're kiddin' again."

"I'm not either."

He picks at his plate, not enjoying the meal.

"Aren't you hungry, John?"

He meets her eyes with a faint smile and a somewhat distant look in his face.

"'The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask this drink divine. . . .
But leave a kiss within the cup
And I'll not ask for wine.'"

There is a certain impersonality in the lines as he speaks them, which keenly appeals to the artist in Lira. But it is the restraint, a restraint of pride, in his tones, which adds to the already considerable conflagration in her heart. She is happier than ever that she decided to do what she is doing.

He leaves his coffee altogether and doesn't bother about a smoke.

"How long will we have together," he asks calculatingly, "after the flight?"

"A long time, I hope."

"Where will we be?"

"Not far apart, I imagine."

John grins. "Sometimes, just for an odd second here and there, I have a creepy feeling that you're having just a trifle too much fun with me."

Lira laughs a little, but is quickly serious again.

"John—do you remember your father—or your mother?"

"Oh, yes," he returns; "Dad went when I was pretty young. Mother left me just before the war."

"What was she like?"

"I'll show you her picture sometime. Warde said he'd

bring you up to the ranch to make a picture—maybe this fall."

"Yes—and maybe in 1940."

He appears to take this remark to heart. "Don't you think he will?"

"My dear, if any man lived who could look ahead one week, let alone six months, in pictures, he'd be shot as a spy and listed Among the Immortals."

John looks troubled for a moment.

"But I figure Jack Warde——"

"Jack's O. K.—but writers can't do anything—unless they go in for blackmail or secret marriages. He may be out of a job himself by to-morrow. . . . What time is it?"

"Five to seven."

"Is it? We'll have to move."

"Yes," says John, delivering one of the few bromides she has heard from him, "I guess nothing in this world stands still."

"Except a heart now and then," she retaliates.

Billy Smith believes it is a flight when "Lora Tate" exhibits the roll of currency.

"Are you sure you know your stuff?" she asks.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Tate——" He halts, taking a harder look at her. "You *said* Mrs. Tate, didn't you?"

"I did."

His eyes linger but change expression.

"Well—I heard you. . . . Mrs. Tate. . . . Where's the gentleman?"

"In my car, waiting. Are you ready to take off?"

"All ready."

"You've got the maps—and all the instructions I phoned in— and baggage and everything?"

"Everything all set—baggage, helmets, and overshoes in the cabin."

"Remember, Billy—if he gets worried and starts giving orders—or gets mad—you land anywhere you can, and the wilder the country the better. I'm doing this on a bet, and we must be away a whole day—provided we don't get to Canada."

"Do you think he'll start giving orders?"

"I don't know; I hope not. . . . Are you sure this has all been confidential?"

"Absolutely. Only you and me and Mr. Reagan himself know about it—and he's gone for the night. He told me to be sure to explain to you, though, that this is all at your own risk. The ship and me's insured, but that don't protect you much, you know."

"I'm all right. You worry about the engine. And don't get turned around and start heading south."

"Ha!" says Billy, eloquently scornful. "Between you and me, I hope he lets us get to Canada. It's a year since I've been over the lines."

"Ever been to Red Deer?"

"No, but I have to Calgary—Red Deer's straight north of there."

"And you're sure of everything—sure?"

"You bet."

"All right. Let's go."

The ship, a Midwest all-purposes monoplane, looks trim and simple to the passengers, in comparison to some of the craft they have seen. No athletics are needed to get aboard—they step on one foot rest, then another, and are in the cabin. The pilot's seat is about four feet ahead of the passengers', separated from it by sliding isinglass windows similar to those on the sides of the cockpit.

"I had them furnish helmets," Lira says, turning as John follows her aboard, "so that we could leave the sides of the cabin open—I hate to be shut in."

"So do I," he admits; "I like to be ready to jump."

They glance at a printed license on the cabin wall, observing that the monoplane's capacity is 542 pounds and that it has a speed of 128 miles an hour. Two passengers, the pilot and limited baggage constitute a load.

"We could have brought luggage if we'd been going anywhere," John remarks innocently.

"Oh, yes." She glances quickly behind the passengers' seat, in rear of the cockpit, where a tarpaulin, however, covers any objects that may be there.

The pilot's head and shoulders pop into view over the

side, and hoisting up a quart bottle of water and a make-up box, which John takes from him mechanically, Billy says:

"If you're all set, Mrs. Tate, we'll take off."

"Let's go," says Lira, avoiding John's gaze.

"What was that he called you, Lira?"

"I gave him a fictitious name—to avoid any possible publicity."

"Why do we have to have water—and this miniature suitcase?"

"It's my make-up box—there's smelling salts in it, in case either of us should need it—and flying always makes me thirsty, too. . . . There goes the motor . . . we're moving, John . . . we've left the ground . . . we're off, John, we're off! . . ."

She seizes him around the neck and kisses him. John laughs and returns the assault.

"Isn't it great?" she cries excitedly. "Isn't it grand?"

The whirr of the engine blurrs the words. John puts his ear close to her lips, but instead of competing further with the motors she opens her make-up box and shows him a memorandum pad and pencil, a small searchlight, a package of cigarettes, a lighter, a toothbrush, and another object, about as large as a shredded wheat biscuit, wrapped in a handkerchief. This she doesn't unwrap. John starts to pick up the memo pad, but she takes it away from him, indicating that it is too soon for this business. Besides, they are missing a brilliant

panorama—metropolitan Los Angeles from a night sky.

For a while, though she holds onto his arm tightly, they seem to forget each other, wholly absorbed in the slowly undulating blaze beneath them. The Angeles Mesa field is already far behind, the huge Hollywoodland sign looms big and is lost. Cahuenga Pass and San Fernando Valley twinkle out.

As he heads over the High Sierras, Billy opens the small sliding windows behind him and calls:

"Everything O. K., Mrs. Tate?"

"Yes," she sings out, "and I like your technic."

"Thanks a lot," he returns, closing the window again.

John has been studying her askance for some minutes. There is something a trifle unusual about all this. That make-up box, for instance. He resists the impulse for quite some time, but, yielding to it at last, surreptitiously gets hold of the pad and pencil. Lira has a notion to stop him, but changes her mind and holds the flashlight for him, supplementing the dim dome-light of the cabin, while he scribbles:

I thought he was simply going to circle the town. We're out in the country.

Lira writes:

Is this a surveying party, or are we out for some fun?

John grins and settles back into his seat, gripping her flank with intent to hurt. She hollers, but he clearly

indicates that he can't hear. They remain entwined a long while and are thoughtful.

The altitude, the gentle swaying of the ship, lull their senses. He tries to imagine they are never going down again, but that up through the cloud banks there will be a mystic landing, where the two of them will alight and walk together along undiscovered paths. . . . She sees her career, her fame, as fading specks of light on a black earth below. The life ahead with John is luminous like the brightening heavens. She would be content to sail on like this forever, unseen, unknown, just so long as she should be with him. Or if they sometime must land, let it be in a strange place, where there will never be heard the trade-mark Miss Morgan, or the whimper of weak and petulant women and still weaker men.

Lira observes that he seems lost in thought. This is all right in its way, but what are those thoughts? She scribbles on the pad:

Write me something.

John acts without delay, as though noting a thought that came ready to hand:

I love you.

She has a quick answer:

Then why don't you marry me—to-night?

The pad exchange becomes still busier:

You know why.

How can I be sure?

By tempting me beyond human endurance.

I may do that.

He turns the flashlight on his own face then on hers.

Hadn't we better turn back?—I leave at twelve, you know.

You 've left already.

What do you mean?

I mean I love you too.

John plies the pencil this time like a man in earnest.

What are you up to, Lira?

My neck.

In trouble? Running away from it?

No—in love. Running away with *it.*

John's posture reflects suspicion. Pushing the mica windows apart, he raises his voice to the pilot.

"What direction are we heading?"

"North."

"Been going that way since we started?"

"I'd rather you asked Mrs. Tate, sir."

"Sir! How do they get that way!" he grumbles, and shutting the window hastens to write another question.

I'm getting uneasy, Lira. Won't you tell me what's what?

By way of reply she fishes a sheet of linen stationery out of the make-up box and hands it to him. The message, he discovers, is written in ink.

DEAREST JOHN:

We are on our way to your ranch in Alberta, and I am going to live there with you, if you'll have me. I hate pictures, and now that my option has expired I think it's a good time to quit. Mother will have a fit, but money is ruining her anyway. I knew you'd never let yourself elope with me, so I am eloping with you. Our cars will be sent to us by freight as soon as we wire for them. If you'll let me do this I'll promise always to love you, and I hope some day we'll have one boy and one girl.

LIRA.

John takes her in his arms and kisses her until she is half smothered, even in that rare atmosphere, then attacks the memorandum pad with renewed vigor.

That doesn't mean I'd let you do it. I don't quite believe you're in earnest.

Ask the pilot.

She gets a word here and there as, with head poked forward, he questions the pilot. Satisfied, he grabs the pencil.

You mustn't, honey. I won't let you. This would be just as bad of me or worse than kidnaping you in an automobile. The point is the same. I'd always feel it was my fault that your career ended so soon. Besides, you're so liable to get tired of a ranch, and then if you couldn't get back in pictures, it would make you unhappy. I'm sure our time hasn't come yet.

He hands her the note, in too businesslike a manner, and leans forward toward the pilot again. Lira catches his arm, holding it until she has read his note, then she writes:

At least tell me what you intend to do.

I intend to ask him to take us back. Maybe I can stay over in Hollywood one more day.

She rightly assumes that he will mistake silence for consent. He speaks to the pilot for a few seconds and resumes his seat. Billy then turns to Mrs. Tate.

Lira leans far over and talks close into his ear. "Tell him you will obey instructions at once, but don't say whose, and circle the ship. Then go north till he finds us out again. When you do land, pretend the ship is disabled. . . . Yes, thanks. . . . Mr. Massey wants to speak to you now."

To John she says: "He wants to speak to you."

"Hello, pilot," says John, "what is it?"

"She says I'm to take orders now from you."

"She was just having some fun with me, pilot, but I think it's time we got back. Will you swing around and head south?"

"Sure," says Billy. "Is that all?"

"Yes, thanks. I'll give you five dollars when we reach the port."

"Great," says the pilot, with a sarcasm he is sure will be missed.

"My god, these dames with money," he says to his engine, shutting the windows once more, "how is it they always pick up with a five-dollar guy?"

The ship describes a graceful circle, John holding Lira's hands too gratefully to be able to distinguish between circles and semicircles, and picks up speed. It is no more than decent, however, under the circumstances, that he should renew the correspondence.

You gave me a scare, all right.

What were you afraid of?

Myself.

That lets me out.

I admire you more every minute. If it were just a matter of us two, you'd have been perfectly right.

Sure it isn't just pride with you?

Does it matter what it is if it protects you?

She enters into this literary work with more enthusiasm, for some reason, than at any stage of the flight thus far.

Why don't we get married and keep it a secret?

I'd do it in a minute if it weren't for you. Now, please explain that.

If I had the lot you stand to lose and you had the little I have.

Can't you forget Miss Morgan and her career for a minute?

Not yet awhile. I may know about machine guns and be something of a gangster at heart, but there's one person I couldn't take for a ride—the girl I love.

Do you expect me to wait five years for you?

No. I think you should free-lance in spite of your mother. Some producer is bound to want you. Then, in a year or two, after you know me better and find out how dull I am—you can coolly look me over.

The pencil flies recklessly this time, and the period goes right through the paper.

When I marry it won't be coolly.

John laughs as he tries to draw her closer. Either she is resisting, or else they are as close together now as two muffled persons can get. As her lips make no present effort to induce him, he rather ineffectually bestows a kiss on her ice-cold hand.

The correspondence course under the flashlight has been somewhat blurring to the vision, but John has seen so many northern lights in Alberta he is reasonably sure of identifying them anywhere. And if there's any direction in anything, the ship is heading almost straight for them. In his excitement he doesn't stop to point out the phenomenon to Lira, but takes hold of the sliding windows in front of him.

"Say, pilot, what's the matter?—you're still headed north!"

"I don't think so, sir—unless I'm getting sleepy."

"Why, I tell you, you are, boy—don't you see the aurora as big as life?"

"Well, now, you may be right. Ask Mrs. Tate what *she* thinks, will you?"

John doesn't wait to write it, but shouts in her ear:

"Wake him up, Lira—I don't believe he knows where he's going. He thinks he's flying south—and, look there—northern lights!"

She prefers to write the answer:

You're right. He must have gotten turned around. I'll get after him.

She addresses the pilot at very close range, and with apparent vehemence, and while she speaks the ship slows down and does an about-face. John, she knows, can't hear her as she says: "Have you any idea where we are, Billy?"

"Somewhere in Utah is my guess."

"Do you suppose we could land in some nice wild spot?"

"Sure, with this moon. I'll fly low as soon as any settlement comes in sight, and land within hiking distance from it. I've got good landing lights."

"Don't spring the engine trouble on us too suddenly."

"I get you. I'll give you several warnings."

Lira employs the memo pad once more, writing with stiff fingers:

This pilot was supposed to be one of their best. But he has his bearings now, I guess.

John digs his watch out from under his overcoat and looks at it incredulously. The hands indicate one o'clock. Lira is equally surprised. John scrutinizes the second hand, but finds it active enough.

Where did the time go?

You always lose track of it in an airplane—even people like you who aren't in love.

I pass that over for the time being. He seems to be flying lower.

The pilot says something to Lira, over his shoulder, and generously she turns him over to John.

"Engine seems to be heating a little. I think it will be all right, though."

"You're flying pretty low now, aren't you?"

"Yes—just in case we should have to land. But I don't think we will."

Lira, who has been fishing around under the seat, conjures a paper sack of sandwiches. It would be poor business to let this little surprise wait for the landing, she reflects; might make it look rather too much like a picnic. She explains in black and white:

I was hungry long ago, weren't you?

The reply is none too relevant:

He says the engine is heating and there's a slight danger of a forced landing.

He accepts a sandwich without literary comment and reads:

Do you think this pilot knows danger when he sees it?

I doubt it. Are you scared?

Do I look it? I wish we would *have to land—on a mountain top—and never get off.*

An osculatory reply to this is interrupted by the pilot, and once more Lira allows her companion to captain the craft.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to land, sir. I'll keep her up, if you say so. Please see what Mrs. Tate thinks, will you?"

John turns to her, and she speaks briefly to Billy, then writes up the verdict.

He thinks we should land. Perhaps we had better.

If you're at all nervous, let's do.

She nods, and John gives the order.

Billy circles back a few miles, guided by a dim light from a remote service station on a remote highway; he loses the light and rises a little, then flutters lower toward a small mountain valley, and with the aid of his lights makes a landing. As the wheels hit the rough ground, two more or less scared passengers are jolted together violently, and John hastens to assure himself she isn't hurt.

"No, but I bit my tongue," says Lira, holding a handkerchief to her lips.

"You made it bleed," he observes anxiously.

"Nothing is won except by blood," she replies abstrusely. "I'm all right, dear."

"Are you sure? . . . You might have been hurt."

"Solid earth feels kind of nice, doesn't it?"

Billy sticks his head in. "Yeh—" he grins—"if this *is* the earth. Looks to me like it might be Mars or the Moon."

"Are we in the mountains or the brush?" John asks, as one familiar with both.

"And how," says Billy inclusively. "Shall I help you out, Mrs. Tate?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Is the plane damaged much, do you think?"

"Can't tell till morning . . . I'll throw out some blankets so you folks can keep warm till I go and scout awhile."

"It doesn't seem cold to me," says John. "How about you, Lira—dear?" he corrects himself.

Billy glances at Lira quickly. "Not a bit," she says, and secretly presses the pilot's hand as he helps her down from the cabin ahead of John.

"If you've guessed it," she whispers, "please don't say anything."

"Don't worry, Miss Morgan," he grins proudly, doubly pleased by her surprise.

John comes over the side with the writing pad and make-up box.

"Mountains it is," he decides. "Looks like sheep

country . . . smells like sheep country . . . by Jove, it *is* sheep country. . . . Watch the grass, Li—er—honey—you'll get your feet wet."

"Not with these goloshes."

"That's right—I forgot the overshoes. . . . Well, pilot, what do we do now?"

"I think you and Mrs. Tate had better take it easy," says Billy, bringing a blanket roll. "I'll go look for some civilization."

"Have a sandwich," Lira suggests.

"No, thanks, I brought along a lunch myself—you'll need all you've got here—I probably won't be back for you till after daylight."

John consults his watch.

"Almost two o'clock."

"Don't look for me till seven or eight," Billy says. "I saw a light off this direction as I landed, so there must be a road there somewhere. I'll probably catch a ride to the nearest town and bring a mechanic back with me."

"Does it look like you could take off here?" John wants to know.

"I think maybe, after we turn her around. But we can worry about that to-morrow." Billy starts for the monoplane to get his lunch and a flashlight.

Lira sits on the blanket roll with an exaggerated sigh.

"Sit down, John. It feels good."

He sits, at a respectful distance from her.

"I suppose there's nothing for it but to wait, eh?"

"I guess that's it. Are you tired?"

"No—not a bit. Are you?"

"Just a little."

Billy brings John a hatchet. "You'll need this if you want to make a fire," he suggests. "Now I'm off, Mrs. Tate."

"Well, good luck, Billy—and don't worry about us—we'll be all right."

"Sure you have enough to eat?" John asks him.

"Plenty—even if I didn't come back for a couple of days. And, by the way, if anything *should* happen, you'll find some bread and bacon still in the ship."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Lira smiles.

"Well," says Billy, "so long."

"So long," says John, playing with the hatchet, a trifle self-consciously.

"Good-bye," says Lira cheerily.

They watch the pilot disappear in the brush, neither speaking until his whistling has died out.

"I don't think he'll need that flashlight," John observes.

"Is your Canadian moon as nice as this?"

"Wait till you see it—some day."

"I probably never will—now."

"Why not?"

"Because Canadians are so stubborn."

He chuckles a little and makes a move closer, but thinks better of it and jumps up.

"How about a little fire?"

"I'm not cold, but it would be nice. First bring me my bag from behind our seat on the ship."

"Bag? Did you bring a bag?"

"Certainly. I thought we were going to Alberta."

"Would you have gone through with this, really?"

"Just try me, even now—I'll start out walking with you if the plane won't work."

He shakes his head, after a prolonged look.

"Boy, what a pioneer there must have been among some of *your* ancestors."

He brings the bag, then, taking the hatchet, reconnoiters for a better spot to pitch camp.

"Here's a dandy place," he calls, a short distance away; "don't unpack anything there. I'll have a fire in a minute."

She picks up the bag and starts toward him, but John shouts to her to put it down and let him do the work.

"I won't do it," she calls back. "This is my party too."

She comes up puffing with the heavy bag and exclaims: "Oh—this is slick."

"I'll cut some pine boughs in a minute and fix you a shakedown—you'll be surprised what a good bed it will make."

She studies his profile briefly, but it isn't legible.

"I guess that's fire enough, isn't it?—You can feed it a bit while I cut the evergreens."

Lira gazes into the fire, amused at the way her heart is beating, and only partially blaming the exercise or the altitude. After an indefinite time, for a camp-fire obliterates the moments, what looks like a walking pine tree appears, and spreads itself on the ground before the fire. He brings the blanket roll, then, and untying it is surprised to find two stew kettles, a small skillet, a can of coffee, another of canned beef, a box of cube sugar, a can of beans, two cans of condensed milk, and a box of crackers, wrapped in the middle of the roll.

"Must be regulation," says the ex-soldier.

"Oh, they always carry a few provisions," Lira explains.

"This is great," John smiles. "I heard water running near by, too. If it weren't for Miss Morgan and Mr. Zerensky I wouldn't care if the pilot got lost for a couple of days."

"You know you'd be bored to death."

He squares up to her. "Say that to my face."

"So you admit you would?"

He grips her arms and stands looking into her eyes. Impulsively, instead of kissing her, he turns toward the monoplane and says:

"I'll look over my own nest and give you a chance to turn in. I'll fix your fire before I go to roost."

"Roost? You don't mean you're going to sit in the ship all night?"

"I'm not sleepy, really."

A momentary flash of anger crosses Lira's face. If she could only hold it, it would be worth a few hundred feet of negative any time.

"I made a big mistake when I told you so much, didn't I?"

John becomes serious, alert.

"What do you mean, Lira?"

"I mean the—other man—I thought I loved."

She can see how this worries him.

"How—a mistake?"

"It made my case look so bad—if ever I had to coax *you*—to be my real lover."

"I don't believe I quite understand you yet."

"Then I guess I'll have to be awfully plain, John. If I could do with you what I *know* is natural and right, I'd ask you to be—all mine—just mine—beginning with now—whether we could let the legal persons and the public know about it at present or not."

"Honey," he says, avoiding her eyes, "these are —pretty troublesome ideas—when you think how we're—situated right now."

"But I realize," she finishes, "that you might feel— no matter what you'd say—that I had played the same sort of a game—on him."

John steps toward her and takes vigorous possession of her person.

"Listen, darling—I know how you feel—it's hard enough for me already—but if I let myself really believe, even for a minute, that it was hard for you, too—I'd lose my foothold, sure—and you'd be the one hurt. Please don't ever think a thought again like the one you just spoke. You're the cleanest, most normal, and sweetest creature that ever lived—and, so help me, God, I've never given Devereaux a minute's consideration except to feel sorry for him. Now—like a good girl—turn in, and call me as soon as you're set."

Lira sits on the bed of boughs, staring into the fire, until temperament distills a few hot tears. Then she suddenly makes up her mind and is satisfied with the decision. Removing her shoes and dress, she puts on a heavy robe and crawls between the khaki blankets.

"John," she calls. "Ready."

He appears in unlaced shoes, an overcoat thrown oosely over a white shirt, and trousers.

"I'll bet you have some bed," she smiles.

"Better than you'd think."

He tucks her in, pauses a moment, and starts back toward the monoplane with an off-hand "good-night."

"Oh—John," she calls, "put out the fire, will you? It keeps me awake."

"You bet."

He smothers the embers, and with another casual "good-night" meanders back to his roost.

There he kicks off his shoes and sits looking at the stars. He has reason to believe that he has acted as any man with an ounce of principle would have acted, but for all that feels a sense of defeat, of surrender to something that is weaker, less courageous than nature; a sense of frustration and futility, not only for now but for the future. He is trying to picture the parting which they have still to face, when he hears her calling, frightenedly:

"John!—come quick—John!"

He springs out of the ship and runs to her in his stocking feet. "What's the matter, dear?"

She is sitting up in the blankets, her eyes wet.

"Oh, John," she cries, in his arms, "something frightened me."

"That's all right, dear—probably only a rabbit or an owl."

She hangs onto him tightly. The robe has parted around her neck, revealing her bosom.

"Are you all right now?" he asks, preparing to retreat.

She hangs on more tightly still.

"No—don't go. I doze off, and then I wake with a start. . . . John—pull the blanket over you—you'll catch cold."

"No—I'm all right."

"Please—why are you so afraid of me, dear? Don't you love me?"

"Love you . . . if only you could know how I do."

He kisses her, and Lira holds his lips to hers coaxingly.

"Darling—kiss me some more—I love you—I can't let you go from me."

"Lira, dearest—some things are just too——"

"—Just too natural and lovely. . . . I'm cold—hug me closer . . . harder still . . . just squeeze something awful. . . . That's grand. . . . Do you love me?"

". . . Lira, sweetheart . . . will you be my wife?"

"John . . . I *am* your wife . . . I have been from the minute I first saw you. . . ."

The scent of coffee and frying bacon slowly penetrates to Lira's consciousness. She tries to open her eyes, but the bright sunlight forbids even a squint. Suddenly she sits bolt upright, like a person startled from a dream.

Fully dressed, John is bending over a pan at the fire. She watches him a moment, cat-like, before throwing a bit of rock at his back. He glances over his shoulder, then sets down the skillet and comes to the shakedown.

"So you finally woke up, eh?"

"I'm not so sure."

He sits on the pine boughs beside her and looks into her eyes.

"Was everything a dream or was it real?"

His reply is conclusive.

"Isn't it a fearfully happy feeling?" she whispers, in his arms.

"I suppose all this was inevitable," John says thoughtfully.

"Do you still love me?"

"Do *you* still love *me?*"

As neither expects an answer they are both satisfied.

"Are you hungry, honey?"

"M-h-m . . . why didn't you wake me?"

"You were so beautiful sleeping there, I wanted to have you to look at."

"Hoh," she laughs.

"Want to get dressed now?"

"I suppose I have to. Will you hand me my bag?"

"Very likely."

He gets the bag for her, then goes toward the camp fire and skillet.

"John."

"Yes?" He speaks without looking.

"Why do you keep your back turned?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a habit."

"Well—you may look now."

He glances back at her, exclaims, "Holy smoke!" and turns to the bacon again.

"John Massey . . . come here."

Stockingless, poorly concealed behind a bit of lingerie, she points with queenly gesture to a spot directly at

her feet. He advances with military step, stands at attention, and offers the circular British salute.

"Now you stand right there while I finish dressing, and don't miss a thing. I'm going to show you what a woman's made of so you won't ever be scared again."

With a quick swoop John takes her off her feet, and carrying her to a cactus bush holds her directly over it.

"Do I have to suffer like that, or don't I?" he demands.

"You do."

Slowly he lowers her toward the cactus needles.

"It stings for an hour, mind you—and sometimes it swells up."

"That *would* be bad—but I think I'll take the chance."

He holds her in the precarious position a second, then with a chuckle tosses her up on his shoulder, in a sitting position.

"Whee!" she exults. "The big, he-man."

Dropping her on the pine bed, he busies himself with the breakfast again, only now he no longer works with face averted from the scene of action.

"John."

"Yo!"

"Do you know what I half expected this morning?—that you wouldn't speak to me."

"I fooled you, didn't I?"

"I didn't know but that you'd be gone—and a note pinned to the plane."

"I did think of it, but then I thought of something better."

"What?"

"Getting some fresh water from a spring up the hill. Here—" he holds up a bottle of it—"let me pour some of it on your hands, and we'll eat."

"Yes, Father."

She helps him spread a khaki tarp for a breakfast cloth, and together they decorate it with a box of Zwieback, a tin plate of bacon, tin cups of coffee, a box of cube sugar, and two apples. Lira makes repeated raids on his thoughts, but he insists that breakfast is one meal that should never be disturbed by problems.

"Whenever I'm going to worry," he declares, "I always wait till the breakfast dishes are in the sink."

"I didn't know ranches had sinks?"

"Mine has."

"Just another proof that you have everything."

"Right at this minute—yes, I sure have."

"And won't you always have now?"

"As soon as you eat that last bite, I'll tell you."

"There—just because you said that, I can't eat it. You sound like you've made some awful decision."

He makes no reply, but starts gathering up the breakfast left-overs, and with one eye on him, Lira

assists. She feels a sudden heaviness of heart and wishes she were alone for a few minutes.

"Let's leave this—it's all right." She catches his arms and looks up into his face unsmilingly.

"Tell me, John. Tell me now—don't make me wait."

His smile, though wistful, reassures her somewhat. "My own Lira . . . my wife," he says softly.

This brings the tears. "Oh, John—I've been waiting for you to say that. You mean it, too, don't you?"

"I never meant anything so much in my life."

She hugs him and asks if she is acting silly.

"And you won't leave me, will you? You'll take me with you to Canada, won't you?"

"Let's sit down and talk about it, eh?"

"Here," she indicates.

He rolls a log under one end of the evergreen bed, propping it up, and pulling a blanket over their knees they rest at a lazy angle, in the mountain sunlight. She draws his hand and arm under her head and smiles as she says: "There."

John's eyes wander away from hers, down the slope of a little valley below.

"I was in a story like this once," she says dreamily. "We were shipwrecked on an island. I remember wishing it would some day happen to me in earnest—with the *right* man. I didn't think it ever really would."

John's expression combines elation and perplexity.

"I'd been trying to believe it, dear, but I guess I was still doubting it a little—about you really—wanting me. But I know now, and—*I* want you just about *twice* that bad."

She smiles faintly, not taking her eyes off his face.

"You couldn't, John—but I hope you do."

"As far as I'm concerned, we can never be parted now—no matter what happens."

"Oh, you darling for saying that!"

"Not to be *kept* apart," he continues. "Of course, I wouldn't let myself take you to Alberta right now."

She rises on one elbow and turns his chin at right angles.

"It wouldn't be fair to you. It would be doing just what I've promised myself I'd never do——"

"But, John——"

"Here's the right thing, Lira—I'm sure of it. I'll go back to Hollywood with you and stay a few days until you either get a leave of absence or else a picture or two with some other producer than Zerensky, who won't drag in the marriage clause. If you get the vacation, you can follow me up to Red Deer——"

"*Follow* you?"

"Yes—you and your mother—and nobody need know there's anything between us."

"Mother!"

"I think I could make her see I wasn't trying to wreck your career—and if you liked the ranch well enough to

really live there, I believe she'd finally give in. You might have to even go back and make one or two more pictures—and give her the money—and if you needed me, I'd get someone to run the place and go with you."

Lira fastens her fingers in his hair.

"Of all the schemers! . . . John dearest—how unselfish of you. . . . I *do* love you for not worrying about the marriage certificate—I was a little uneasy about that, really—you're such an ancient old thing. But, you see, *I* want it."

"I know, honey—we both do. It wouldn't be just like this if we didn't. But it would make things too tough for you right now."

"Don't you suppose I understand? You're right in a way—it would be easier for me to keep you hidden awhile—*if* I were going to stay in pictures, even as a free-lance. But I want to get away from pictures—right to-day—this minute—and elope with you. I'd like to start right out on foot now and find a preacher or a justice of the peace."

"So would I. But we mustn't. Now, tell me, what's your objection to my plan about the leave of absence?"

"And take Mother? In the first place she wouldn't go."

"Then your aunt?"

"You do think fast, John. . . . Yes, Aunt might. But then—Mother would know what I was up to—wouldn't she? . . . Too bad I took you out to the house. If only I

hadn't done that, we might have been able to put this over."

"Anyway, dear, we at least ought to try. I'll go to the bat with your mother, first of all, and I suppose we won't know just what move to make till after that. But at least we wouldn't be running away, as this would be, and leaving them flat. Do you see?"

Lira makes no effort to conceal a look of admiration.

"The thing you've been dreading—don't tell me, John—I know it—having Mother think you want me for Miss Morgan's sake—you're willing to do now, rather than take the chance of my getting tired of your ranch and losing my career by not being able to get back to it."

"Well, isn't it a mighty small thing to do, when you think of it?"

"It's the hardest job a poor woman ever let her poor man attempt."

"Then you'll let me?"

"I'll see how you behave while we're all alone here to-day."

He starts to sit up. Lira drags him down again.

"I was just thinking," he says, frowning, "that if the pilot suddenly came back——"

"He'll come back whistling—he left that way."

"I hope it's night before he gets here," John observes, more himself again now.

"But maybe you're right. Let's go for a walk—farther back up in the pines."

"All right," he agrees. He helps her up, and holding her at arm's length surveys her attire. She is wearing a dull blue suède trench coat, with beret, over a gray tweed suit; a flaming coral scarf, and heavy calf-skin brogans. The sealskin coat has been laid aside.

"Some outfit for roughing it," says John, admiringly.

"Do you like it?"

"Great."

"Let's go. What do I carry?"

"Carry? Carry on!"

"There she is," says Billy Smith, pointing through the scrub pines. "Not a bad landing for the middle of the night, was it?"

"Dandy," agrees the other boy, a rural service-station mechanic.

Billy looks at his watch. "Four-fifteen—but I don't suppose *they*' ll mind."

"Heck, no—*they*'ll be happy."

"The five-dollar guy and I might have been able to get her up, without you—but she's supposed to need a mechanic, see?—so we'll monkey with her awhile, just as a bluff. The lady'll probably give you another ten besides the fifteen I'm payin' you."

"It's worth it, too—we've walked near eight miles."

"Tell *her* that, if they've had a scrap or anything, and she hollers about us bein' late."

"How much is she payin' *you* for the flight?"

"Oh—a few bucks. The boss gets most of it—but I'll have my own ship some day—and when I do, I'm goin' to park it right on some movie lot."

"Movie lot? Why?"

"Because every once in a while those guys just *got* to fly up in the air! Get me?"

The country boy is as deeply impressed with Billy's monoplane as Billy is with the evergreen shakedown.

"Can you beat it?" he says. "She started for Canada with him, and this is as far as she could get him!"

"Who is she?"

"She's—she's my passenger. . . . Let's turn the engine over, and then we can take it easy till they come back to their canned willie—if they ever do."

Lira carefully extracts a Waltham watch from John's vest pocket and glances at it. As she slips it back, the sleeper sighs deeply but fails to rise to the surface of consciousness.

She thinks of the many men who have admired her since she was fourteen; of the several who tried hard to possess her, and of the one who was clever enough to succeed. How could she ever have thought that was love? The passionate, too-personal amorousness of Tony—what a contrast to the reserved, enveloping endearments of John. The tears burn in her eyes as she reflects that with more sympathy from her mother she might have belonged even more than she does to John.

But then would she have been so sure of herself, so certain she could never be happy away from him?

Should she tell him now of the collusion with Billy Smith, and why she cried out last night? Or would it be better to wait until she makes him publicly declare himself as her husband?

He thinks she would be lonesome on his Alberta ranch. What satisfaction it will be to show him she is better stuff than he imagines. He insists on going back to Hollywood—nothing can stop him, so they may as well go. How well she knows what the result will be. Whether it's two days or two months, they'll be going to Canada together—and until they do, they'll be—together.

What will Maria Griffith try to do to him when he tells her about them? But why be afraid?—*John* isn't afraid. How comforting, how thrilling to have someone to fight for your heart, after all this fighting over your "career." Career! What could be colder and emptier than a career! Old friends looking you up to see how you live and find out whether you really do make so much money or not; new friends pestering you for engagements and introductions; strangers, mobs of them gaping and trying to get at you. Where is there any fun in this?

And clothes? Why do we want nice clothes?—To be envied by women and admired by men. But how could John ever look more admiring than he did this morning

as she slipped on her sports skirt?—And where is there a woman in Hollywood who, if she knew, wouldn't be envious of the last twenty-four hours?

A shrill whistle from down the slope wakes John with a start.

"Shoot!" says Lira. "You were having a grand time."

"I was dreaming about you, honey. . . . Did the pilot whistle?"

"Yes." As she speaks, the call is repeated. With two fingers in his mouth John answers the signal.

"Don't let's hurry. . . . What were you dreaming about me?"

"I thought we were up on the ranch, snowed in, and you were showing me how to bake a ham."

"Snowed in . . . baked ham . . . m-m-m, doesn't that sound cosy? The best of it is, it's going to come true. . . . And how did you know I liked snow?"

"I didn't—but if our schemes against the powers in Hollywood work out, maybe we can be married at Christmas—up there——"

"*Christmas?* This is only April!"

"You could make one picture now, then visit the ranch and see if you were going to like it, and come back and make another picture or two by December. If they knew these were your last, they'd pay big, wouldn't they?—and your mother would be all set."

Lira sighs. "Sometimes I wonder if she isn't *your* mother instead of mine, John."

"I hope she soon will be."

She studies him in silence a while, wondering. She no longer has to guess at the attraction she holds for him —that has been proven even beyond what she had dreamed; but how is he able to endure the thought of several months' separation? Is his own love stronger than her own? But how could it be? Why does nothing seem to matter to her now but being with him? Surely young married women can't all feel like this? She has talked to any number of brides—they couldn't have had just these same emotions. Isn't there, after all, such a thing as perfect union? Lira feels sure there is, and that there must be some good reason why it has come to her and John. She prays within herself that she may always be equal to it and never disappoint him. She is determined it shall be like this. She will do anything, anything—except be away from him.

"Whew!" says John, looking at the time. "Four-fifty. And you were to be in Zerensky's office at noon."

"I'd like to see him and Mother right now—I'll bet they're together. I left her a note, you know."

"Did you? . . . I guess we'd better start back, honey. . . . What did you tell her?"

"Pick me up—I'm lazy."

His obedience to this request involves considerable delay.

"It's our last few minutes alone up here," she reminds him.

"You'll be worn away with all this corrosion," he laughs.

Slowly they go down the hill, her back and elbow supported by an arm which easily hoists her over rocks and stumps.

"I told her I was going to hide away for a day or two, to make up my mind about W. U. R., and to tell Zerensky I was sick. She won't know what to think—she'll probably blame you. But we'll be back by midnight, anyway, and I'll phone her then. . . ."

Billy and the mechanic have the plane turned around and seem happy to announce that they've gotten the engine working again.

"I didn't see the note you left tacked to her, Mr. Massey, until we'd been here quite a while," the pilot explains.

"We walked eight miles," adds the mechanic, "and it'll be another eight back for me."

John takes Billy aside and tells him to make his own deal with the mechanic, and put it on the bill, to be taken care of when they arrive back at the port.

"How much will I give him?" Billy asks tentatively.

"Pay him by the hour, and then give him this five for me. I'll see you again at the port."

Billy gets the mechanic around to leeward of the ship.

"What did I tell you?" he exclaims, exhibiting the five. "This bozo must believe in numerology."

Lira spills the contents of the make-up box while rummaging for something, and in helping her gather the things up John accidentally lifts a handkerchief off a roll of fifty-dollar bills.

"You'd better carry that for me," she says; "I might lose it."

As he makes no move to pick it up, she glances at him quizzically.

"What's the matter?"

"I was just wondering—what this expedition is going to cost."

"Not a cent—it's already paid for."

"But, Lira—how could it be, dear?—you don't mean you paid for a flight to Canada?"

"I left them a twelve-hundred-dollar deposit——"

"Twelve hundred dollars!" John fairly gasps.

"—There'll be a refund now, of course. This little jaunt will probably only cost three or four hundred."

John wraps the money carefully in the handkerchief again and deposits it in the make-up box.

"Whatever it costs, I'm going to pay it," he says, matter-of-factly.

"Oh, no, you're not."

"Oh, yes, I am."

"We'll see about that."

She takes the bank-roll and puts it in his trousers pocket.

"Didn't I tell you to carry this for me?"

He entraps her hand in the pocket. "First tell me how much I'm liable for."

"Fifteen hundred, I think."

"You *think?*"

"No—let me see—seventeen hundred, I guess it is."

"You're some depositor, you are." He examines the currency and finds forty-one fifty-dollar bills.

"Two thousand and fifty bucks!" he exclaims, in tones subdued. "Three hundred and fifty more than you thought."

"Jack Warde got it at the bank for me—I didn't take time to count it—I thought he said twenty-five hundred altogether—but he must have said thirty-five——"

"Was it the balance of your account or something?"

"One of them—Mother has the other. I was going to start up a new business in Alberta."

She teases him with a grimace, to which he is finally obliged to submit.

"Honey, listen—how much money do you spend—just for clothes and pleasure—say, in a year?"

"I've no idea, John. Now, forget it, won't you? Imagine talking about money *here*."

"But, dear——"

"Now no 'butting'—our honeymoon isn't over yet, remember."

She slips a hand in his. The boys are packing the last of the equipment in the ship and are momentarily out of sight.

"Our honeymoon!" says John.

Assured by the pilot and his improvised mechanic that the engine is now all right, John helps Lira on with her coat, overshoes, and helmet and hoists her aboard. Throwing on his own things, he climbs in after her, sets the make-up box at her feet, and pats his trousers pocket to make sure the bank roll is still there.

"All set?" inquires Billy, at the levers.

"All set."

The mechanic takes hold of the propeller.

"Contact!"

She glides down the easy slope and makes a pretty take-off.

Lira and John wave to the receding figure down below in the brush, as they quickly take up a careless half inch of space which has somehow gotten between them.

Billy sweeps sou'west'ard, heading for distant ranges of mountains over which the late afternoon sun is sinking to the desert below.

With cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling in the exhilaration of the flight, Lira tries to make John see on his left panoramas which exist only on her right.

Now the sun has left the earth below and shines only

on the clouds and on the birds—God's and man's.

They cling to each other's hands and are silent. . . .

It is dark, and John has things to say. Lira follows his movements as he looks in his pocket for the memorandum pad. He starts to write:

The thing to do, dear, is——

She reads this much as he writes, captures the pad and pencil, and scribbles:

If you love me
As I love you,
No pad can cut
Our love in two.

He borrows the pencil a moment.

I do, I do,
I do, do, do.

Lira indicates that this is quite satisfactory, and seizing the pad throws it out of the ship.

During the timeless hours that rush over them now, as they journey on through the heavens, toward a place which is of the earth earthy, there is no longer need of speech.

They merge into each other's souls, as into the silvery darkness of the ether, he with the strength of man's hope, she with the sublime weakness of woman's love.

★ ★ ★

The airport bill is three hundred and thirty dollars. Unable to prevent John from leaving a check for the amount, Lira casually points out that it is on a Canadian bank. Reagan, the airman, therefore asks Mrs. Tate if she objects to leaving on deposit here cash to the amount of the check until it is cleared. John isn't accustomed to having his checks secured in this way, but reflecting that he is a long way from home, excuses them somewhat for their skepticism and considers the matter closed—except for the pilot.

"Smith," he says, aside, slipping a bank note into the pilot's hand, "your boss sure charges for overtime—I hope he gives half of it to you—you deserve it."

"Thanks."

"But whether you're both millionaires or not, I promised you this—it's quite a lot of money where I come from."

Lira honks the horn of her roadster, close by.

"Well—so long, pilot."

"So long."

Holding the money in his fist Billy says to his boss:

"Mr. Reagan, here's my tip for the flight. How much do you guess it is?"

"I'll bet it's a fifty."

"How much would you bet it's over five dollars?"

"Have you seen it?"

"I give you my word."

"I'll bet the amount of it that it's at least twenty bucks."

"I'll take that—you pay the difference if you lose."

Billy unfolds the bill.

"You win," says Reagan.

"It isn't his fault," Billy declares, with sudden understanding, "—he's got five wisdom teeth."

Regan pays over the fifteen and starts away, but remembers something.

"Oh, by the way, Billy—tell the cashier to put that check in an envelope in the morning—Mrs. Tate's chauffeur will call for it sometime to-morrow."

"O. K. chief. But don't kid me—Mrs. Tate!"

"Isn't that her name?"

"Not that lady. That's Lira Morgan, the movie actress."

"You don't tell me. . . . "

"Down to earth again," says John, as Lira guides the Marmon north on Angeles Mesa.

"Yes, but not for long. We'll get a sky car of our own if they try to get rough with us."

"Boy, that reminds me—I almost forgot about your money!"

He draws the roll from his pocket and starts putting it in the make-up box. Lira immediately pulls in to the curb.

"I suppose that means you think I'm going home to-night?"

"I figured you would, dear."

"Well, I'm not. I'm going to a tavern somewhere, and you're coming with me."

"Oh, but, honey—what if someone recognized you?"

"We'll go over on the north side somewhere—anywhere—so long as we're together."

John sighs, not unhappily.

"I suppose if I try to talk you out of it you'll think I don't feel that way myself."

"No, dear—I know you love me. You know I know that—now, don't you?"

"Yes . . . yes, I know that, sweet."

"Well—what else matters? It's nearly twelve, and you must be tired—I know *I* am. We can sleep like two logs—then to-morrow—we'll start things."

"Start things?"

"You can come with me to Mother—and get shot."

"Lira—I won't leave you to-night—I promise that now; but there's something I want you to begin thinking about right away—I started writing it on the ship, but you threw the pad away. It's this: Go after a leave of absence before you do anything else. I've been thinking it over—I don't believe you should even mention the marriage-clause business—just the leave of absence—for two months—or even one—to give you a chance to

see how I live—how I *must* live on the income I am able to earn. Then, if you're determined to give up your own income—and live on a ranch—I'll let you have your way. But I don't want you to burn your bridges—you mustn't do it, honey."

Lira pets his hand. "Now don't be so serious, you silly. Of course I'll go after a leave of absence."

She starts up the car again and turns east on Washington.

"That doesn't mean I'll get it—but I *will* try, for your sake. What *I*'m anxious to hear is you telling Mother we're in love! Nobody knows what will happen till after that. . . . There's a drug store—I guess I'd better phone her that I'm safe."

John makes the purchase of a toothbrush and Gillette razor while Lira struggles with a pay phone. He waits for her, then, in the roadster, watching her through the plate-glass window. When she returns she flops in the seat beside him with something of a groan.

"My God, what a woman!"

"What did she say?"

"I couldn't get it quite all, because I think she finally swallowed part of the telephone."

"I suppose *I*'m in it, too?"

"*In* it? My boy, you *are* it!"

"Did you tell her we were away together?"

"I said we had chaperons."

"The pilot and the mechanic, I suppose?"

"Just the two people I meant—how could you have guessed?"

John laughs, a little too briefly.

"'Take no thought for the morrow,'" he quotes, with a long face, joining Lira then in an outburst of animal spirits.

As they turn north on Vermont, John lays a sudden hand on the driver's arm.

"Hey—Lira—look!"

"Recognized!" she says to herself dramatically, but relaxes presently when she discovers that he is only pointing at the Boulevard Theater where Conrad Nagel and Lira Morgan are featured in a new picture drama. The last show has been over for an hour or more, but the stars twinkle on.

"I've seen it often enough before, I guess—but just now it struck me differently, somehow."

"How, differently?"

"As though Lira Griffith and Lira Morgan were two different persons."

"Of course they are. I suppose everybody is, John—except possibly you."

"Fellows like Nagel must be—rather interesting. I've always liked him on the screen."

"Conrad's a nice chap—awfully decent to work with."

Lira glances at his thoughtful profile, secretly amused. Is he subconsciously aware of a slight twinge of jealousy? She hopes so.

"Louis Wolheim worked on that picture too, I see."

"Yes—poor old Lou went out in a hurry."

"Haven't I read somewhere that he was a Harvard professor?"

"No—Columbia—mathematics, I think."

"Hollywood's full of interesting people, isn't it? When Jack and I walked along Hollywood Boulevard the other day——"

He breaks off. "Was that only the other day?"

"I guess it must have been. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"What a lot can happen in just a few hours."

She recovers her free hand from him long enough to cross Beverly, surrendering it again immediately.

"You'd miss these people probably more than you realize, Lira."

"I had the measles once—and how I missed them afterwards."

But this doesn't upset his too sober mood.

"When I first came out of the army, even though I was glad to get away from it, I felt lost for a long while, up there on the ranch. I hadn't thought I'd ever miss anything the army could offer—but I found myself getting homesick—terribly homesick, and remembering all the interesting fellows I had bunked with during the five years. . . . Five years—that's just about the time you've been in pictures, isn't it?"

"Five or ten, I'm not sure which."

Over the Los Feliz hills, through Glendale and along

Fletcher Drive, they come to the pretty suburb of San Marino.

"There's an inn, John. Shall we look it over?"

"Anything you say, dear."

Parking the roadster, they cross the street and go in the small lobby of a two-story, water-painted brick hotel. No one is visible at the desk, but when John rings the bell a Filipino boy appears.

"Could we see one of your nicest rooms with bath?" Lira asks.

"Yes, ma'am," the boy replies. "Double or twin beds, ma'am?"

"I—uh—either," Lira says, with a note of impatience which is not lost on the Filipino. She glances at John, and observing that his color has heightened a trifle realizes that she must be blushing a little herself. As they follow the boy up a carpeted stairway John observes, with less than his usual composure:

"Doesn't it seem warm to you in here?"

A faint giggle escapes from Lira, but she is instantly sedate again as the boy turns, at the head of the stairs, and remarks that though the hall may be warm the rooms are not.

He shows them a large room, well ventilated, neatly furnished, and clean looking.

"Not bad, John—shall we take it?"

"Why—yes, dear."

"Have you a garage?" Lira asks.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well our car is across the street—a Marmon roadster. Here are the keys. Bring the bag out of the back, too, please."

"Yes, ma'am."

The boy goes out, and turning to John, Lira catches him looking at the bed—a double one. She meets his eyes.

"The little devils—aren't they sharp?"

They laugh simultaneously, John so amused, once he gets going, that he seems unlikely to stop for some little time.

"He nearly had you that time, didn't he, Lira?" John sputters.

"Please!" she cries, a shade hysterical herself. "Have a heart, John!"

Supporting himself on the side of the bed and wiping his eyes, John endeavors to talk as one sober.

"Say, honey, why should this seem so wicked here when it seemed so noble in the Utah hills?"

The remark brings a painful sort of squeal from Lira, who begs him to either shut up or leave the room.

They have only partially recovered when the bell-boy reappears with the traveling bag.

"Now, if you'll come down and register, sir . . ."

"Yes—go ahead—I'll be right down."

"Boy—can you get us some coffee and something to eat?"

"Yes, ma'am. We have some cold chicken and rolls."

"Just what I'd like—with lettuce. And you, John?"

"That sounds great—but could you make mine tea?"

"Yes, sir." The boy goes out.

"Say—how shall I register?"

"Any name you like—just so long as I'm his wife."

"I don't like to use a phony name, dear—it seems so sneaky."

"All right—what's the matter with John Massey?"

"Would it be safe for you?"

"Why not? Nobody knows either of us in this hotel."

"Well, then, I'll sign for Mr. and Mrs. John Massey."

He takes her hands on this. "How does it sound?"

"It sounds grand."

"Does it really? In that case I'll hurry right back."

The name in black and white on the room register fascinates John. Blotting it carefully, he gazes at it a while, but fails to notice the gleam of delight in a pair of black oriental eyes as he asks for a card of the hotel.

"Just so I won't forget the address," he explains.

"Will you be here long, sir?"

"I don't know."

John puts the card in his wallet carefully and starts upstairs. Then he remembers the scantiness of his wardrobe.

"Say, brother," he addresses the boy in a stage whisper, "is there any place I could buy a pair of pajamas this late at night?"

"I find you a pair," the Filipino grins. "You can give back when you go."

The boy disappears, and another Filipino comes through a swinging door with a tray.

"Wait," says John, "I'll take that up in just a minute."

"Yes, sir."

The other boy returns with the pajamas, and holding them under the tray John goes upstairs, the boy who didn't get the two half dollars at his heels.

"I'll open the door for you, sir."

"Oh, thanks," says John, reaching for another half, "you guys look so much alike I figured you go fifty-fifty."

John conceals his pajamas under a pillow and proceeds to clear a small coffee table for the cold chicken supper.

"The eats are here, Lira," he calls.

"Coming right up," she answers from somewhere.

In another moment she appears, wearing a flimsy silk robe, her face moist and shiny with cold cream, and her heavy blue-black hair fluffed around her shoulders.

"Ah!" he gasps facetiously, "how helpless we feel before a sight like that!"

"I know," she retorts, "—just covering real embarrassment with a little clowning."

"And how you guessed it," he admits. "I suppose I'll *always* be flustered when I see you like this, honey."

"I *hope* so."

He places a chair for her, and clandestinely removing the borrowed pajamas from their hiding place, tells her to sip some coffee, that he won't be over ten minutes matching, if not eclipsing, her toilette.

"Ah!" she exclaims facetiously, "how helpless *we* feel before a sight——! . . . Where did you find the pajamas?"

"Rented them from the bell-boy. Several small deposits down, and I drive them myself."

Lira shows two symmetrical rows of brilliantly white teeth, biting at a chicken wing in the middle of a smile. John feels that he must be in good form, or why would she chuckle so much at him? Would Conrad Nagel or Ronald Colman think him amusing? Mightn't it be fun to meet a few of those folks? . . . No—he tries a dull joke on her, and she responds just the same. It's just something he can't explain.

"Won't you taste some of my tea?" he invites.

"Do I have to sing 'God Save the King' too?"

John laughs. "You're some sort of imp—a fascinating wild spirit, and I'm only dreaming."

"Let's not wake up." . . .

She sits on the side of the bed, in his arms. "You know," he says, softly, "if all who love truly could be married just like this, there'd be lots more happiness."

"I almost wish I wasn't so set on a ceremony. I'd just like to see how long I could hold you without any chains!"

"I only wish I could put a padlock on you right now!"

"Maybe you could—ministers don't mind getting up at 2 A. M. if you pay them for it."

"If we had a license I'll bet you would."

"*Would* I? Just try me."

"Gosh, what a sample of the feminine gender. . . . Say, honey—there's one thing kind of worries me. . . . Do you care anything about—kids?"

"We'll have three in six years. . . . How does that suit you?"

"Then you do like them?"

"I love everything natural—including a little sleep occasionally. Turn out the light, will you?"

". . . And, Lira . . . if anything delayed us . . . if we had to wait . . . on your account . . . and supposing something had . . . happened already . . . what then?"

"Why, then, sweet, God would be on my side. . . ."

Mrs. Griffith blows a fragrant cloud of Old Gold smoke toward her coffee cup, inhales another deep puff, and springing up from the breakfast table, reconnoiters for a third time from the front windows.

"What in *hell* is keeping that girl?" she demands of her weaker sister.

"Too bad you didn't ask her to leave a phone number —she may have overslept."

"Oh, she's given Ellen Reilly orders not to answer the phone, don't worry about that. Probably had to have breakfast with this dry-farmer. My god, think of it—a dry-lander—a gopher sniper! Lira Morgan, the rising star of W. U. R.!"

"What time are you to be at Zerensky's office?"

"Eleven sharp. It's almost ten now."

"Maybe she's picking up Mr. Warde—she always brings him when she expects a scolding."

"No, I told her to be sure and come alone, and that Zerensky wanted to talk to just the two of us. I also made it plain that we wouldn't stand for any more stalling on the contract, and I told her that if she allowed herself to be seen any more with this country buck I'd give the tabloids the story of how Tony Devereaux jilted her. Maybe this didn't make her boil! . . . The little idiot—going out on a party with that fellow. I'd just like to know who the chaperons were."

Lira stops the Marmon a few yards south of her own driveway, in order not to be seen from the front windows of the hacienda.

"I'm glad I have you with me, John. But I've a hunch this is going to end in a spasm. Are you sure you want to go through with it?"

"It's the only thing to do, Lira. We have to get her on our side before we can go any further."

"I hate to hear you say that—it makes *everything* look hopeless."

"Now, don't you worry. Let's go in, and I'll talk for both of us."

"Oh, look, Maria!" Mrs. Tate exclaims, backing away from the window.

Mrs. Griffith emits a choking sound, takes a hold on the window hangings, recovers sufficiently to do a left face, and stands rigidly waiting for the door to open.

Lira registers the shock, distinctly enough, but makes a plausible attempt to appear casual. In contrast to John's apparent calmness, however, the screen star has played her entrance poorly.

"Are we late?" she inquires, preferring to meet the aunt's mildly reproving look.

"I should think *we* are!" Then to John: "I suppose she didn't tell you, Mr. Massey—but I have something very important to discuss with Miss Morgan—alone."

"Yes," says John quietly, as Lira maneuvers to a more or less sheltered area near her aunt. "I wanted to speak to you first, though, if you don't mind."

Mrs. Griffith's eyes acquire a still colder glaze.

"We're due at the studio in an hour—we're in an awful rush, really. People not in pictures don't quite realize what we in the profession are up against."

Lira lights a cigarette, her fingers unsteady and cold. She knows she will break out before the scene is over, but is going to hang onto herself as long as possible.

"I hoped what we had to say might have a bearing on your appointment with Mr. Zerensky."

"So *you're* talking about 'we' too, are you, Mr. Massey?"

"Yes. Lira and I love each other, Mrs. Griffith."

The movie-mother's features freeze, then soften long enough to remold themselves into a superb contempt.

"Don't . . . be . . . ridiculous. Come, Lira—do your hair differently, and let's go—I want to stop at your dressmaker's on the way."

"But, Mrs. Griffith——"

"I'm sorry—really." She starts toward the library.

"Mrs. Griffith!"

There is an arresting quality in the tone. Mrs. Tate twists at her handkerchief. Lira lays down her cigarette. The mother halts and turns toward him.

"Could Lira and I speak with you alone just a minute?"

"Excuse me," says the aunt; "I'm sorry," and makes an immediate escape to the *comedorito*.

John goes closer and speaks earnestly.

"I know how you feel—I don't blame you. But I want to convince you that it isn't the way it might look."

"What way is that?" The tone is sharp.

"Mother!" Lira tries to moderate.

"I mean that she's famous and successful, and I'm—nobody at all."

"Yes?"

"But, Mrs. Griffith, she feels sure she cares about me, and I'm here to ask you if you won't give her a chance to prove whether she really does want to give up pictures for me or not."

"Lira Morgan give up pictures for you?—I should say not! Nor for any other man—even if you were as important as *she* is—which you admit you're not."

"But what about her? Don't her feelings count a bit?"

"Any half-human-looking man can hypnotize most any girl if the circumstances are favorable. Girls in pictures are no exception—in fact, they're more idiotically romantic and susceptible than any other class. You may have been lucky in happening along just when she felt in the mood—but it won't last a month——"

"You've said enough, Mother!" Lira catches John's arm. "Come on, John—I'm not going to have you insulted like this. It's no use, I tell you."

"No, wait, dear.... Mrs. Griffith, I'm able to support not only myself, but any girl who would like to live as I live—and that's all I'm asking of you—to try and get her a short leave of absence so she can visit my little ranch and find out for herself——"

"You don't know what you're talking about. Either she signs with W. U. R. Studios now, or they get someone else. And as for living the way you live, among the cows and horses and hayfields—why, Miss Morgan probably makes more money in a month than you do in a year——"

Angry and humiliated, Lira seems about to spring at her mother, but John grasps her hand, and she starts to cry.

"I don't want you to listen to her, John—she has no *right* to talk that way."

"What if she does make more money than I do, Mrs. Griffith? Money isn't everything. Was it everything to *you* when you were a girl?"

Ignoring this point, the movie-mother demands almost savagely:

"Why did she bring *you* here to talk for her? Why didn't you let her come alone, as I asked her to?"

"Because she's afraid of you, Mrs. Griffith." John's voice is shaded now with an anger of his own. "Because you have her clamped down to a life she hates, and she needs somebody to help her a little."

"Why, you impudent——"

"—Don't think you can intimidate me, madam. I'm here to fight for the girl I love, and who loves me, and who some day is going to be my wife."

"Not by a *damned* sight!"

Mrs. Griffith turns and marches toward the library.

"Wait! . . . I see you have to know."

This stops her in her tracks. As she turns, her face reflects the growing fear.

"Lira and I are man and wife."

The movie-mother gasps, rolls her eyes, and falls to the floor in a faint.

"Aunt Julia!" calls Lira, in no great alarm. "She'll be all right, John—don't worry—she does this often."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm glad it's over with."

John picks Maria up and lays her on the ottoman, and with the aid of smelling salts and whisky they bring her back to Hollywood.

But the moment she recognizes the "dry-lander," Mrs. Griffith starts to rant and scream, working herself up to a fit of old-time hysterics. Lira looks helplessly on, tears of exasperation in her eyes as she fears the effect on John. Mrs. Tate goes to the door and summons the chauffeur, then to the phone and calls a doctor. John sees the colored boy in a full-length mirror, standing with cap in hand. his jaw hanging loose.

"Boy, come here. . . . Get me a bucket of ice-cold water."

"Yes, sir."

The patient continues her writhing and screeching until the bucket is brought, and John picks it up.

"What are you going to do with it, John?" Lira asks, above the clamor.

"I'm going to throw it on your mother," he replies in a loud voice.

The effect is magical. Mrs. Griffith strikes an attitude of undoubted sanity on the instant, and, puffing and whimpering, cries, in almost a sweet voice:

"You wouldn't—you wouldn't do that!"

"One more shriek out of you, Mrs. Griffith," says John, with assumed anger, "and I'll *drown* the devil out of you!"

She relaxes and begins to weep softly, but is careful not to work herself up again.

"Now," says John, by way of reward, and sitting on the side of the couch, "I've good news for you."

The patient becomes exceptionally alert for so ill a person.

"No one will know of our marriage, Mrs. Griffith. It's to be kept a strict secret, for Lira's sake."

"Why is that—if she's going to Canada with you?"

"I couldn't yank her away from all this"—his gesture seems to include the hacienda and its costly furnishings —"without being sure she wanted to give it up for good. And I feel the same way about her career. She is too great an artist, in my opinion, to just simply cut loose and never make any more pictures."

"Why, John," Lira ventures rather timidly, "this is news to me."

"I thought," he continues, the mother interested and much less hostile now, "that Lira should first pass

on the Alberta ranch; then, if she wanted to give up her career, arrange to make a picture or two first and give you the money. It would make us all feel better—and then after that she could still come back to Hollywood for a few months occasionally, or even work in a picture if she hankered after it. Because she'll be a beauty for twenty years yet, at least—and neither the public nor the producers are going to forget her."

Mrs. Griffith sits up, as weakly as possible.

"What if Mr. Zerensky refused to give this leave of absence?"

"I don't think he would if *you* asked him."

"But what if he did?"

"In that case," says John, "you could surely make him compromise with a contract for, say, one year, instead of five, and he could leave the marriage clause in. I'm sure I'd be very willing to wait."

Lira experiences a sinking feeling, between these two Leo types, but it seems to her best to remain silent for the moment. If it came to a showdown, *could* she stay away from John for a year? It appears very certain to her that she could not.

Mrs. Griffith takes a finger of whisky and removes her stout limbs to the side of the ottoman, even allowing John to assist her a little.

"Mr. Massey," she says, with apparent friendliness, "if I do my best with Mr. Zerensky to get Lira a month's vacation——"

"Two months," Lira corrects.

"Well—two months, then—will you promise to keep this marriage a strict secret—even if we have to compromise with him?"

"I intend to keep it secret anyway, Mrs. Griffith, as I said—for her sake."

"All right. Our appointment with him is for eleven o'clock. We have just twenty minutes."

Her mother's quick change of front worries Lira, but she tries to convince herself that John may have penetrated a little, after all, beneath the hard worldly shell. Perhaps she has been a little bull-headed herself at times.

She is glad when her mother suggests that she run out and get in the Pierce, as it gives her a minute alone with John before the interview, and she has so much to say.

"John, if he should turn me down, and I did hang on for a year, just to shut Mother up, would you come down *real often* to see me?"

"It would be hard to manage, honey—the expense and everything——"

"Oh, but *I'd* pay that, silly."

"No, Lira—I wouldn't come at all if you did. You see, a ranch ties a person almost as badly as a studio—and I'd have some fixing up to do for you."

"But, John, I'd *have* to see you—*often*. . . .

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Mrs. Griffith hangs up the telephone receiver with a secretive, jubilant air and hurries out to the car.

"Now, Mr. Massey," she says briskly, the woman of business once more, "where shall we drop you?"

"Anywhere near Highland and Sunset in Hollywood," John replies. "My car's near there."

"Telephone me at the studio, John, in about an hour."

"Why, darling," her mother intervenes, "what are you thinking of?—the studio mustn't under any circumstances——"

"Your mother's right, Lira—if Zerensky thought this leave of absence *meant* anything, he probably wouldn't grant it."

"Why, of course, Lira. Mr. Massey has more sense than *you* have . . . about these things," she adds, a trifle late.

"Then I'll meet you at the Wigwam, John—say, at one-thirty——"

"But——" the mother starts to interfere.

"Now, never mind, Mother," Lira says, with finality.

"Oh, very well," Mrs. Griffith yields, "but you'd better make it two."

"And if we'd said two you'd have made it three!"

The tone is less impudent than resentful.

"You see what the mother of a star has to put up with, Mr. Massey."

"I'm not a star, Mother. Haven't you discovered even yet that I'm only a featured player?"

"It's only a technicality—Louis Zerensky himself calls you his 'little dark star.'"

"Yes, the little black kyke."

The mother decides to ignore this fighting mood, which comes over her temperamental daughter every time there are important business matters to arrange.

"By the way," she asks, in a voice too low for the chauffeur to hear, "you haven't told me yet . . . was it Agua Caliente?"

"That *would* be a fine place to escape publicity. . . . It's our secret, Mother."

"But it must be on the records somewhere . . . what names did you use?"

"Don't worry," John assures her; "I'm just as anxious to keep it to ourselves as you are. In fact, Mrs. Griffith, I wouldn't even tell *you*."

He winks at Lira, whose temper is softened a little by the faint suspicion of a grin on his face. He presses her hand.

"Cheer up, dear . . . we have a good ally—your mother hasn't forgotten all about her own honeymoon. *Have* you, Mother?"

Maria's cheeks flush a trifle. However, a street intersection comes, as if by a miracle, to her assistance.

"Isn't this your stop, Mr. Massey?"

"Oh, yes. So it is."

"One-thirty, John."

"You bet. Good-bye, Mo—Mrs. Griffith."

"Good-bye."

She looks straight ahead of her grimly as she observes:

"I don't deny the boy has a certain charm, Lira."

"Well, I'd just as soon you'd neither deny nor affirm it, Mother. Just forget it."

John notices a slip of paper sticking out of his right-hand coat pocket. On closer inspection it proves to be a sheet of mauve writing paper with a pleasant aroma, and carries this message:

I'm counting on you to help me keep her from doing anything you'd both regret.

HER MOTHER.

"So that's why she lagged behind us," John reflects. "She thinks of everything. . . . I hope she'll prove too smart for Zerensky."

The little producer greets his little dark star with outstretched hands. Lira avoids his eyes, as usual, because she hates looking into them, and consequently misses the glance he directs at Mrs. Griffith as he says:

"So she takes a day off without leave, eh, Mama, and comes back to sign the contract?"

"Oh, you mustn't rush her like this, Mr. Zerensky," the mother gurgles, "she's just a wee bit cross to-day."

"Oh-h! My mistake. . . . Anyway, she looks chawming . . . never saw her look prettier. Vacations must agree with her."

"Thank you," says Lira coldly.

"You wouldn't say a good word for vacations, Mr. Zerensky, if you knew what she came here to ask you?"

"No?"

"She wants a leave of absence."

"Leave of absent?"

"For a couple of months."

"Couple of months? Leave of absent? You're kidding, ain't you, Lira?"

"Why should I be? Isn't it time I had a little rest of some kind?"

"Oh, but now—just when we're in big p'duction—you're too good a trouper not to know what that means, Miss Morgan!"

"I know—you're always in production. When you're not, you lease me out to some studio that is."

"But we pay you big money, my dear girl, and it has to come from some place, you know."

"Well, Mr. Zerensky, either I get a two months' leave or I won't sign with W. U. R. at all."

Lira expects her mother to fly up at this, and is ready with several good answers, which, to her surprise, she is not given the opportunity to use.

"Now, dear," comes the almost gentle remonstrance,

"you needn't put it that way. After all, you owe this studio a great deal—Mr. Zerensky has been very fair to you in the past and will continue to be, I'm sure."

"Just give me the opportunity," says Zerensky with a smirk, and answering one of his phones for a third time.

He lights a heavy cigar and smacks his fulsome lips as he comes out from behind the mahogany and seats himself comfortably nearer to Lira.

"Now, first let me see what it's all about. Is it you are tired of pictures, mebbe?"

"How did you guess?"

She lights a cigarette in self-defense and fixes her eyes on a pomegranate shrub outside the window. Her mother and the producer silently consult one another a moment before Zerensky says:

"Well, now, listen, Lira—I want you should be happy first of all. Business is business, but I am willing to help you all I can. Of course, if you won't let me, I'll just have to lose you."

"Hear that, Lira? You wouldn't want that to happen?"

"I'd love it." She turns to her mother with a quick, determined gesture. "If it wasn't for you I'd walk out of here and stay out."

Zerensky taps his cigar, supplementing a signal with his eyes, and Mrs. Griffith relaxes a little into her chair.

"What would you say to a two-year option, Lira, with twelve hundred a week, and if you still want to quit then, you can suit yourself?"

"Two years is a lifetime when you feel the way I do."

Zerensky's secretary, an angular, red-haired Hebrew girl, comes in apologetically and reminds him that Mr. Al Christie has been waiting almost five minutes. Louis rises to his full height of five-feet-four.

"Miss Morgan," he says crisply, "there's one thing more I'll do. I am willing to make that option twelve months, with no time off—not a day less—it carries a marriage clause, of course, and if you don't take it I'll get Evelyn Brent to-morrow. I will ask you to step in here, please, and give me your decision before you leave."

He opens a door leading to an inner office, very small, but beautifully furnished in Tabasco mahogany, even boasting a modernistic couch.

"I'll finish with Mr. Christie and call you in a few minutes," says Zerensky, closing the door on them.

"Oh, Lira, dear, please don't turn him down!" The movie-mother begins her plea with tears in her eyes.

"I'm still in debt for our Canyon lot—there's a trust deed on our house—we just can't cut down all at once like this. If you'd given me a little warning—just a little, dear. But to close in on me like this—you must realize yourself how unfair it is."

"Well, don't carry on so," Lira scolds, in a softening

voice which instantly apprises the elder and more wily woman of victory.

"You'll do just that much for Mama, won't you?"

"Now, pull yourself together—John told you we weren't going to run out on you, didn't he?"

"Oh, my baby—I knew you wouldn't. You're so generous—just like your dear daddy."

The tears now drip as though they really meant it.

Leaving her mother to read over the contract which she has hurriedly signed, Lira takes a taxi west on Sunset, toward the Wigwam, where John's Dodge is parked. . . .

"You're a clever woman, Mrs. Griffit'," Zerensky grins. "If you hadn't phoned me ahead of time I'd have give her a vacation sure."

"Yes, and if she got up there with him she might *never* come back."

"'The bigger they are the harder they fall,'" he recites, remembering the line from his last four pictures with "Broadway" in the main title. "'Scuse me, please." He answers two phones at once and chokes off the office buzzer with a "no—not to-day."

"This way, Mr. Zerensky, she'll get weaned away from him—the infatuation is sure to wear off—and if I know the type he is, he won't be coming down to see her. Besides, he can't afford it."

"There's one thing you must do for me, though, Mrs.

Griffit': keep that contract away from her, and when the year is up and she discovers she signed for *two* years—you've got to back me up."

"Don't you worry. Before six months she'll be *coaxing* for a long-term contract—especially, Mr. Zerensky, if you hint that you intend to *star* her."

The little producer's eyes dilate in admiration if not inspiration.

"You *are* a clever woman, Mrs. Griffit'. I'll think everything over you've set. Yes—I think it over. . . . Now—do you mind?"

"Oh—how stupid of me—I keep forgetting how busy you are. . . . Good-bye."

"Good-bye, my dear lady. Come in often, won't you?"

"Thank you so much."

John is sitting on the tile steps of her upper apartment at the Wigwam when Lira arrives.

"Isn't Ellen home?" she asks, trying the door.

"I didn't knock," John replies. "What news, honey?"

"She must be here. I'll tell you later. Get ready for a disappointment, John."

He suspects her a moment until he sees that the serious look in her eyes persists.

They go in, and Lira finds Ellen having her noon siesta in one of the bedrooms.

"Are you asleep, Ellen?"

"Good lord," the Irish secretary exclaims, sitting up sleepily, "where did *you* come from?"

"Listen, Ellen. I know you're one of two people in town who can keep a secret. Do you want to hear one?"

"If it's about the beautiful Canadian, I sure do."

"Don't you think he's gor—don't you think he's grand?"

"*Gor*geous."

"Well, I'm in love with him. We're going to be married."

"Married!"

"The studio may make me wait a whole year—for the ceremony. Meanwhile, I'm a modern human being, and my soul tells me it's my own. Savvy?"

"Darling—you're perfectly right. God, how I envy you!"

"I thought you might hear things, and I wanted you to get it straight. I don't care about the others. . . . Now, here's my phone number until he leaves for Canada—and after that I'll be back here with you. Don't give this number to anyone except Jack—especially not to Mother. I suppose he won't stay long now, but while he's here I'm going to have him."

"Gee," says Ellen, her piquant profile wistfully pretty, "if ever it happens to me, I hope it will be just like this. I can see just how it is with you."

"Well—I'll be seein' you—but I hope not too soon."

"So do I."

★ ★ ★

They drive slowly back to the San Marino tavern, and John hears the bad news with subnormal spirits.

"Did you suggest the year's contract, dear, or did your mother?"

"Mother—no—it was Zerensky."

"Zerensky? Queer he should have made the very suggestion we were thinking you should make, wasn't it?"

"I hadn't thought of that. It *was* a coincidence."

"I suppose we ought to be feeling gay about it. Do *I* look gay?"

"You'd better not."

They sigh in concert.

"I suppose you think I did it for Mother, don't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well—I didn't. I did it for you."

"Me?"

"Because you wanted me to."

"Don't say things like that. . . . I'll never be able to go home."

"It's true. What Mother needs is a year or two of hardship—it would be good for her soul—my own, too, maybe."

"Yes—I think your mother *is* a little spoiled, honey—but not you. I know you'd give up everything like a shot if I'd let you."

"Why don't you?"

"If I were sure you knew how big the sacrifice would be I might be tempted. That's why I feel so disappointed that they wouldn't let you have a leave of absence.

Even a week or two, up there in the long, twilight evenings—with only a handful of neighbors—and some of them pretty speechless—it would be a stiff test—stiffer, I'm afraid, than you can imagine."

"It still sounds like heaven to me."

They discover an English tea room adjoining the inn, which Lira suggests they try for lunch.

"Let's eat here all the time," she says, delighted with an order of pot-pie.

"All the time?" John smiles interrogatively.

"Yes—you won't hurry home *now*, of course? You'll stay at least a couple of weeks, won't you? And, John—I'll expect you down every three months—that will be only four trips in the year we have to wait."

This is such a large order, all at once, that John feels he had better pass it up entirely for the time being.

"Suppose we don't think about any plans at all right now, but just pretend that we're in New York or somewhere on our honeymoon—and I'll rent some evening clothes and we'll step out for dinner and a show."

"Glorious!" exclaims Lira. "We'll have so much fun you won't be able to tear yourself away! And, John—I've a suggestion . . . there's a Garbo première to-night at the Circle—we'll go together—and I'll knock them all over—with *you!*"

John laughs, not embarrassedly, because it's too much of a joke.

"I guess I'll knock them over all right."

"Zerensky will be there—it will be a lovely chance to worry him. He's got his pound of flesh—now we'll make him pay for it. He'll have visions of me jumping his old contract—and I hope he goes home with a bilious attack."

"Vengeful creature."

"And there are some hungry hearts I'd like to show you to. Some of them think they're married because they're followed around by a mascot—I want them to see you and die."

"My darling, have mercy! . . . Do you suppose there are any dress suits my size?"

"If there aren't, we'll put you in overalls. Wilson Misner will probably be there in his b. v. d.'s anyway . . . and, say—would you like Jack with us?"

"Yes—I would."

"Maybe Jane will come too. She's a beautiful blonde—should be in pictures, but she's too smart—and do she and I set each other off? . . . Oh, pardon me," she clowns a little, "for such bad taste."

"You taste wonderful," John contradicts.

"You said that about the pot-pie," she reminds him, "and look—you left it."

. . . Forty or more searchlights play on the night sky around the white Circle tower, as the moths flutter in and the black beetles trot in from all sides.

Heavily obligated as I am to Lira for selling my latest and worst story to W. U. R., I seize this unexpected opportunity of blowing myself to an evening of her choosing. It was a job to find a good-looking tuxedo John's size, especially as he kept reminding us that the one at home fitted him so well, but with the help of two tailors we succeeded, and now, with two beautiful women to guide us, I feel that we may safely alight from the black-and-yellow taxi between the lines of male and female infantry that jam the sidewalk.

Lira is wearing a white satin form-fitting gown under a black velvet coat trimmed with white fox, white satin shoes ornamented with crystals, and long diamond earrings. Her luxuriant blue-black hair is pulled back to reveal a pair of ears which have lost more than one primal temperament its equilibrium on occasion, and is done in small curls at her neck. Jane, tall like Lira, and of almost the same figure, wears a dress and wrap of coral velvet trimmed with brown fox fur and necklace and shoes of coral. She has parted her gold hair in the middle, simply, and gathered it in a roll low on her neck. The two make a striking team.

Freeman Lang, wisecracking into his microphone, gets his eye on Lira the moment we step out of the taxicab and tells the world he's going to ask her if she won't say, "Hello, Everybody." I just have her persuaded when some alleged relatives of one of the lesser producers grab the mike ahead of us, transmitting mes-

sages which sound like code to destinations which we suspect are Berlin and Leningrad. Freeman, however, captures Lira and puts her on the air. John is trying not to look pleased or proud and seems unaware that his color matches her own.

"Hello, friends," Lira broadcasts, smiling. "I hope you won't hold that last picture of mine against me! I'll try to do better next time. Some day I hope to make a *real* picture. Good-night."

The announcer makes haste to lavish adjectives on this girl, "one of the younger stars from silent pictures who is destined, one of these days, to make the very top and stay there." It's the first sensible thing I've ever heard Freeman say when excited.

We have a few minutes to show John the paintings of old California, on the mezzanine floor, and also have considerable trouble in getting him away from them.

"There sure is a fascination about this country down here," he declares fervently.

"You'll be with us," I prophesy, "like all the rest. You come, you see, and are conquered."

"We have ranches here too, you know, John," Lira cooes, as they walk ahead of us.

Jane whispers: "Hear how she says 'John.'"

"Yes," John admits, "but without rivers the cattle perish."

Lira turns to us.

"Rivers—just think of it—he has big deep rivers up on his ranch—and lakes——"

"And the Arctic Ocean only a stone's throw away," John contributes discouragingly.

We pass down the aisle to our seats, shot in the back here, stabbed there, and bitten somewhere else, and sit down to enjoy once more a scene which Lira insists is the most thrilling canvas in California—the Circle Theater curtain.

"That's the Donner Party," she explains to John. "They have just come over the Sierras, at sunset, and are looking down on their new home, California. . . . They were all massacred by Indians."

John gazes at the picture, enraptured. "It must have been a great life," he says, in a sort of soliloquy.

"Yeh—for the Indians."

"Jack!" says my wife. "You're profane."

"Ever hear *The Chocolate Soldier*, John?"

"Yes—the boys put it on in our own division."

"Well, there's the fellow that wrote it—that big, sad-looking man there on the aisle—Oscar Straus. Since his first interview with First National they say he smiles less than ever—they asked him to compete with Tin Pan Alley—or was it collaborate?"

"Conglomerate," says Lira.

Willingly or not, we hear Freeman announcing the celebrities as they continue to arrive.

". . . John Barrymore and Mrs. Barrymore—the lovely Dolores Costello. . . . Won't you say hello, Jack?"

And far from the microphone we hear a faint and whimsical "Hello."

". . . Then you, Miss Costello? . . ."

"John won't let me," she laughs.

"Lira," says Jane, "did you hear the latest from Barrymore?"

"No. . . . There he is now, John. . . . That's the royal son himself."

"Yes," John replies, "I believe I'd recognize him. I saw him in London just after the war."

"Oh, just like that! . . . Listen to him give us the ritz, would you!"

"I sat in the gods," John adds, "for two shillings."

"Just for that you've got to take *me* to Europe," says Lira, "some Sunday real soon."

"You know Barrymore has a great sense of humor," Jane explains, for John's benefit, "but there's one thing he demands of the world—and that is instant recognition. They tell this for a fact: recently he made a purchase in a toggery on Hollywood Boulevard—Hollywood Boulevard, mind you, Lira—and after the purchase was made the clerk rested his pencil on the counter pad and said: 'Name, please?' With one of his Svengali glances Barrymore said: 'Barrymore.' 'Which one?' asked the clerk. 'Ethel,' said John, in disgust.

Joe Schenck, with psychic powers which contrary to

tradition do attend mathematical faculties, reads my mind and nods to us cordially as he passes down the aisle—Schenck, the big-hearted, the overworked Santa Claus of Gimmeville. He is accompanied by a parade in which Norma Talmadge, Buster Keaton, and Constance Talmadge are prevalent. A tall, thoughtful boy in his twenties is identified as Howard Hughes—the lone eagle, a productional menace to less courageous birds, but for all that with the heart of a dove.

The pageant slowly dissolves into a close-up of the gifted Ina Claire and a famous husband. They greet Lira warmly, he with a smile more sad than tears.

"That's Jack Gilbert," she informs John.

"Poor old Jack," I sigh. "He's packing around a heavy sorrow."

"What is it?" John asks, with human interest.

"He doesn't know how popular he still is."

Longing for the return of Carli Elinor's orchestra, we sit through Abe Lyman's band, an alleged Mack Sennett comedy by four accredited and three discredited gag men, and a dreary shuffle of routine dancers of all sexes. We are just sitting down with a groan for a look at Greta the Absent, when the screen announces intermission. This being, however, our chief reason for attending a première, we rise as one man and go out front to spy on one another.

"John may hide behind that innocent look of his on an occasion like this, Lira, but don't tell me he isn't

going for these high-priced beauties of ours. Just watch him eating them up."

John grins. "I've heard of these openings, but I thought the stars came here mostly in print."

"Don't ever think it," says Lira. "This is their county fair."

"Do you recognize many of them, Mr. Massey?" Jane asks him, with a reserve which fortunately for me Hollywood has never been able to surround.

"Yes," says John, "quite a few."

"All right, let's see you name them."

"Well—I see Constance Bennett . . . Joan Crawford . . . Nancy Carroll . . . Claudette Colbert . . . Ann Harding . . . and Marie Dressler. . . ."

"Good work."

"Some of them see you, too," says Lira.

"Who's that big fellow leaning against the arch?"

"You mean the guy with the full-house grin, basking in the blaze of envisioned audiences?"

"Over there, yes."

"That's Sam Hardy—on opening nights his smile sunburns."

"There's a chap I like," says John, suddenly—"Gary Cooper."

"Do you? I'll bring him over—but don't scare him—he's shy as a range steer."

Before I get back with Gary, however, Lira is the center of a group of ranking celebrities, telling her how

stunning she is, and laying themselves wide open to an introduction to John. So I pretend to Gary that I wanted him to meet my wife, also a Montanan, and am instantly aware that it was a poor stroke of business on my part.

One of two belles who seem entirely capable of looking at John without revulsion is Sam Goldwyn's new find, Ruth Channing, a natural blonde with angelic eyes of blue, a china skin, a classic profile, and a home-grown Boston accent which will make the talkies tougher and tougher on southern Ohio. She followed an army of fascinating stage dames to Hollywood late in 1930, saw them march back in battalions, regiments, and finally divisions, and still insisted that she was the one destined to click. She did. Now she is confiding to Lira and Jane that she was really my discovery because I told her how good she was and got her the lead in an industrial picture. The picture was so bad that it demonstrated her immortality, and so faith came to her.

The other menace to Lira's immediate tranquillity is one of the silkiest sirens and most modest maids in pitchers. When Myrna Loy, here with her popular and genial mother, accepts his hand with a bashful smile, John—yes, strict veracity compels this admission—John blushes just a shade. Here is a girl of Lira's own type, gifted and beautiful. True, her hair is red, but her eyes are of that mystic green which disturbs the complacence of big men from the open spaces.

"Miss Loy is from Gary's country, too," I inform John, able finally to bring the two six-footers together.

We are now the center of interest, thank God. . . . I may sell another fable on this. . . .

I catch John Miljan and Freddie March, also Bull Montana and Ed Robinson, looking at my wife, and not to kill her evening entirely I move away a short distance, hoping to be recognized by Cecil De Mille, or Jesse Lasky, or at least by Sig Russell of the Pot-boilers, as I contemplate writing a revolutionary stage play.

John and Gary have the effrontery to detach themselves from their admirers and talk cows. I never saw Gary at his ease like this. That John is a great boy.

It's safe to say, I think, that this is the biggest night of Lira's life, to date. It delights her beyond words to have John walk away from the girls like this. None too polite, perhaps, but Gary will get the blame, as he does for a lot of things. It gives her the opportunity, moreover, to hear them rave over the Canadian, whom she describes as "a man of mystery from the Hudson Bay country."

Garbo not having shown up, as every one knew she wouldn't, I'm inclined to put the intermission down as Lira Morgan's scene. Yes—here comes Zerensky—it's Lira's scene.

"How scrumpshus we look!" cries the little man, his ferret-like eyes darting in all directions in search of the man of mystery.

"Oh, John," Lira calls sweetly, and loudly enough for the other women to hear.

John approaches, towering over the miniature Pole like a maple tree over a stinkweed.

"I want you to meet Mr. Zerensky—Mr. Massey."

John grips the soft, fat, bristly paw until Louie's stomach distends.

"Oh, yes—we've met before," says John.

"So you did," Lira apologizes. "I forgot."

Louis gets away from him quickly and draws Lira aside.

"I'm glad I saw you here, Lira," he whispers unsanitarily; "be ready for an early call to-morrow—we got to make a test.... I want you sometime should get a test in *that* dress, too."

Lira feels resentment as she realizes that he is apparently not worried about John at all. He acts more than ever as though he had a chattel mortgage on her. Could it be that anything passed between him and her mother after she left them to-day with the contract? Surrounded by the gaiety of the lobby crowd, she experiences a chill of loneliness and dread as she thinks of John going away and leaving her to the mercies of her mother and this little schlemiel.

Conrad Nagel and his charming wife greet Lira warmly, followed by Irving Thalberg and Paul Bern—Paul the apostle among the gentiles, friend of publicists and sinners, and defender of the faith that the re-

generate have in Hollywood. John remarks to me about so many of them calling her by her first name and how she retaliates in kind.

"You're out of luck, John," I remind him, "if you're a Mr. or a Mrs. or a Miss in this gang. If it weren't for my unborn children I wouldn't wear a surname in this colony any more than I'd wear a hat."

"She's wonderfully popular, isn't she, Jack?"

"Yes—if they turned 'em all loose here with one contract in the ring, I believe she'd come out with fewer scratches than any of them."

"I do wish I'd brought my own evening clothes," he whispers unexpectedly.

"Why? . . . You look perfectly jake. . . . Getting a kick out of this, aren't you?"

Lira cuts in on the answer, never more than a few feet away from him at the most.

"Yes, this is real sport."

"Be careful you don't go Hollywood, John," she cautions. "I saw some of 'em going for you in a big way."

John smiles it off and says with a frown: "You know, now that I get a good close look at these folks I don't know whether they're unhappy or not."

"How could they be *happy*, John? Most of them have never seen Canada—let alone London, England!"

He is about to grapple with her for this, but remembers that he is surrounded by Hollywood.

"There's one thing you deserve to be congratulated on anyway, John——"

"What do you mean 'anyway'?" Lira demands.

"—Anyway, you didn't say: 'Why they look just like ordinary people!'"

"There goes the gong," Jane warns us, unwilling to miss a foot of her Greta.

The picture is a few hundred feet along when John leans over in front of Lira and whispers to me: "This starts off exactly like *Sapho*."

"It is *Sapho*."

"Did they have Daudet's name on it?"

"Why should they? He's dead, and so are his lawyers."

"It's always been one of my favorite stories," John tells Lira. "But I can't feel that this boy here is anywhere near in love with her."

"You ought to know, John."

I watch the two of them through the show, sitting with hands locked on her knee, under her coat, like any two young kids in any dark and remote movie palace among the sticks. Once he gets over the handicap of Bobbie Montgomery, himself handicapped by a misfitting part, John seems to become lost in the story, and Lira completely absorbed.

Jane is always moved when Greta the sad goes into a deep scene, but I am surprised to see tears in Lira's eyes, particularly in this audience.

The mood remains with her, too, after the curtain, and I am not unprepared therefore when she declines an invitation to supper.

"I have an early call to-morrow," she alibis.

We leave them at the Wigwam, where the Marmon has been parked, by Jesse, the colored chauffeur, and Jane notices that they get in the car instead of going upstairs.

"It's a wonder she isn't afraid to drive him home," Jane says innocently.

"Were you ever afraid to drive me home?" I demand.

"You didn't have a home," she retorts, immediately cuddling to protect me against the blow. . . .

They drive past the room where he formerly stayed, so that he may look in the mail box, for the last time, he thinks, but doesn't say it.

"Hello . . . here's a notice from Western Union."

He hands it to Lira as he gets back in the car.

"You can have them read it to you over the phone, at our hotel. . . . I hope it isn't something to take you away, John."

"I would like to have stayed a day or two longer, anyway," he replies thoughtfully.

"A *day* or two? Why, John!"

"How long did *you* figure, dear?"

"Oh, at least a couple of weeks, honey. Even that would be terrible."

"But don't you know it gets harder every minute?—and besides, sweet, it's spring, and I have to get things under way at the ranch."

Lira sits silent a few moments.

"I wish I hadn't signed," she says at last, rebelliously, as the tears start down her face. "I wish I had let them go to hell."

John squeezes her hand tightly and says: "Oh, come, now, dear—it's tough, but, after all, a year soon slips around—we'll both be busy, you know—and I'll write every night—even if it's only a page."

His own courage, a lot more staggery than she realizes, reassures her a little, and when they get to the tavern and finally to the phone, Lira believes she is pretty well braced for the news. Perhaps it will be *good* news——?

John asks the telegraph clerk to repeat the message while Lira stands close beside his chair, resting part of her weight on his shoulder, and watching his profile anxiously.

"Yes . . . I have it now. . . . Thank you."

He meets her eyes a moment, then pulls her down on his knee.

"Big snowstorm, honey . . . short of feed . . . liable to lose my stock . . . I'll have to leave right away."

"Right away? How soon?"

"I should go—now. . . . I'll wait till you've gone to the studio in the morning. . . ."

His eyes convince her that he knows he must go through with it. She sees that tears may make it harder but will not hold him. So she weeps anyway—copiously and gloriously, on his shoulder, wilting his winged collar and pleated shirt-front. John pets and coaxes her for an hour or more, being finally obliged to help her undress and put her to bed.

The most difficult thing in the world for lovers to stage is a parting.

From the moment the phone wakened her and she told Ellen to tell her mother to leave her alone for just one hour more, Lira has been trying to decide on the place and the minute in which to let him go. At last, with the time slipping away so fast, she picks a spot at the edge of Griffith Park above Western Avenue.

They sit in John's car, her own roadster parked ahead of them, ready for a last-minute dash to the studio.

"I'll be stopping to rest for a few hours every night, and I'll get a note off to you," he promises. "This is Friday. If you say you'll write me an air-mail letter tomorrow and address it to Pocatello, Idaho, it will reach there Monday night, and I'll get it at general delivery next morning."

Lira writes down the address and slips it in her handbag, which she closes quickly, so that John won't see the check for $330 which he made out to the Reagan Airport.

"We'll be glad we stuck, when the year is over," he assures her.

"Maybe," she replies. "But it seems all wrong to me, somehow."

"Please don't be so downhearted," he coaxes. "We have more than our share, you and I."

Lira forces a smile.

"I guess we have, John. . . . Believe me, I'm grateful, too."

Another moment's silence, their eyes and lips meet once more, and John lifts her out of his car into the Marmon.

"Good-bye, honey," he says simply. "You drive away first."

She starts up the engine. "I'll be writing my first love-letter to-night," she promises, determined not to be tearful at the last minute.

"And so will I," he says. "Remember—Pocatello."

"Yes, John. . . . Good-bye . . . dear. . . ."

"Good-bye . . . sweet. . . ."

He waves back as she is lost in a turn of the hillside road. Then he springs into the hardy Dodge, the rancher's car, and turning east on Los Feliz, bids Hollywood good-by.

Arriving on the set, Lira learns to her supreme irritation and disgust that the test which occasioned all this rush has been called off. She hesitates for a moment,

undecided whether or not to give a demonstration of temperament, but remembering her mother's recent exhibition, and realizing that John would not have been able to stay over in any case, she allows Clank Wales to curse for her and goes in the office to call Ellen.

The girl at the switchboard halts her with the message that her mother has been calling her all morning. Lira thanks her, and getting Ellen on the line hears the same news. "She says she *must* get in touch with you *at once*," Ellen declares.

"What's the matter?"

"She wouldn't tell me, but she said it was very important. She called you before eight o'clock—you know, when I first phoned. I imagine she's gone to the studio after you by now."

What can the fuss be now? Is there a chance in the world that her parental business manager might have some *pleasant* surprise for a change?

"Betty," she speaks to the switchboard, "will you please call my mother and tell her I'm on my way home now?"

"Yes, Miss Morgan."

"And if you miss her and she comes here, tell her I'm waiting at the house for her."

"Very well, Miss Morgan."

Timid, nervous Aunt Julia Tate meets her at the door anxiously.

"Did you see her, Lira? Where have you been? My, I'm glad you turned up."

"What's all the excitement?"

Lira throws her hat and cloak over a chair and flops on the ottoman.

"Maria went to the studio half an hour ago——"

"Well, she'll be back—I left word."

Mrs. Tate picks up a section of the *Morning Gazette* as though it were on fire and carries it to her niece, falteringly.

"Look," she says, pointing to a paragraph on the front local page under a black heading.

Lira moves to a more upright position as she reads:

FILM ACTRESS FLIES ON MYSTERIOUS ERRAND WITH HANDSOME STRANGER

Lira Morgan, the screen star, under an assumed name, is said to have made a record two-day return flight to Utah this week, in company with a young man said to be from her own state of Wyoming. The only other member of the expedition being Billy Smith, the Reagan Airport pilot, friends are inquiring if this meant a secret marriage.

Lira glances at her aunt uneasily, reaches quickly for a cigarette, and begins devouring the news item again, as the telephone rings.

"Yes, Maria," says Mrs. Tate meekly, at the receiver, "she's here. All right. . . . I will."

"She wants you to wait for her here. She's just had a word with Mr. Zerensky."

Lira lets the newspaper fall to the floor and relaxes. Another cyclone on its way, but what's the difference? That's all there ever has been in this house. Excitement, adulation, publicity, gushing, hurrying, aspirin tablets, raving, arguments, fights, depressions, hysteria—how fed up, how weary of heart she feels as she thinks of it all. . . . Maybe this unexpected notoriety will change Zerensky's mind . . . maybe he'll let her out! . . . Why not tell them she *was* married, legally, in Utah? . . . She could leave her mother the house and most of the cash, telegraph general delivery at Pocatello, Idaho, and in three or four days catch up with John in her roadster. What a thrilling adventure that would be . . . how easily life could be made perfect, all-desirable, if the world would leave her alone. . . .

Lira is already well past Victorville, on her imaginary flight from Hollywood, when a sound like a mighty rushing wind is heard on the porch, and Maria Griffith bursts into the room.

"Well—well—you've made a nice mess of things, you have. . . . It's a good thing W. U. R. have lots of influence. If that story ever went out—if the *Gazette* wasn't correcting it right now—and apologizing for the mistake they made, it would be all day with *you*, young lady."

Lira lets her draw breath, having nothing to say

herself until she hears more—which she is sure she will. But it doesn't start off as promisingly as she had hoped.

"Where *is* he?" the mother demands, by way of a parenthetical pause.

"He's gone to Canada," Lira replies.

"Now, listen, Lira Griffith, I want the truth out of you. Is he gone back or is he still in Los Angeles?"

"I tell you, Mother, he's gone. He went this morning." The tone carries conviction.

"Where did you stay last night?"

"I think that's my affair, Mother."

"Your affair! I guess it was an 'affair' all right. You ought to be *ashamed* of yourself. I never would have believed that a daughter of mine——"

Lira straightens up. The aunt is looking on from a far corner of the library.

"Now, don't go getting worked up again—it isn't going to do a *bit* of good. And I don't want any insults from you, either, Mother. John and I are man and wife."

"You are, like hell! I guess I wasn't at Louis Zerensky's elbow right now when he talked to Mr. Reagan of the airport. The pilot dumped you in the sagebrush, that's what he did—and left you there—on a roll of blankets!"

Lira flies at her mother, in a burst of tears, and clutches her by the waist front.

"Talk about *me* being ashamed," she cries passionately, "it's *you* that ought to be ashamed!"

Mrs. Griffith pushes her away, and she sinks down on the ottoman, crying.

"Well—we'll let it drop, then." The mother moderates her tone. "It seems that girls these days just have to be damned fools—and after all, it could have been worse. To tell the truth, I'm relieved. I thought you were married."

"We *are* married," Lira insists.

"All right, if you were—tell me where." With sudden suspicion: "Last night? Were you married somewhere last night?"

"We were married in the only way two people *could* be, in our position. When my year is up I'm going to Canada, and then we'll make it legal."

"Thank God!" exclaims the movie-mother, dropping into a Morris chair. "Oh—what a relief—what a load off my mind!"

She sighs and puffs awhile, then tells her sister to mix a cocktail, which, when down, inspires immediate activity.

"That you, Mr. Zerensky?" she phones. "Yes . . . yes, it's me. . . . Everything's all right . . . yes. . . . He's gone back to Canada. . . . No . . . no, they aren't married. . . Isn't it? . . . Everything will be fine . . . so glad the newspapers are fixed. . . . Yes—the poor dear will just rest to-day . . . it *has* been trying on her. . . . But, *you* know, Mr. Zerensky—a high-strung girl—the strenuous life—*you* know."

With dry eyes Lira lies listening to this, conscious of a tightness within, as though her heart, or whatever it is that suffers inside, were being put under pressure. She wonders if she is going to be strong enough, even for John's sake—for John's sake, but for no good she sees that she can do him—to stand it?

"Now, dear—take off your clothes and lie down."

The tone is almost tender now.

"Go in on *my* bed—so you can get the morning sun. I sometimes wonder if you wouldn't prefer that room to your own—or do you like to get the sun in the afternoon?"

Lira mutters a meaningless reply and, crossing through the hall, lies on her mother's bed, where she can look at the ragged robin hedge and smell its fragrance. Maria closes the door leading to the hall and urges her to try to sleep.

"I won't let anyone disturb you," she says gently.

Lira tells herself that she must try to stick. It's going to be next to unbearable, but there will be letters. . . . Will he ever telegraph, she wonders? How would he send a telegram from the ranch—would he have to telephone the nearest depot? Yes—that's how it used to be in Wyoming. . . . She feels a sudden homesickness for the sagebrush. . . . The hills turn blue-gold and purple at evening . . . and how the sweet clover perfumes the air. . . . Farther north, she has heard, the summer

world is still lovelier . . . the flowers are so much more fragrant . . . and those Canadian trees . . . what are there besides maples? . . .

Her eyes wander back from the ragged robin bushes and rest on an object lying on the floor, near the head of the bed. It looks like a legal paper—has blue-paper backing like a movie contract. . . .

She picks it up and finds that it is the contract she signed. Her mother must have had it under the pillow. Why should she have hidden it?

Lira glances over the numbered, typed lines as these questions run through her mind. Then she comes to a word that stops her . . . she sits up in bed and examines it more closely. . . .

Two years . . . so they signed her up for two years and told her it was one! . . . How much like Zerensky that was . . . how much like her mother! . . .

She springs out of bed and opens the door into the hall. She halts in the doorway, however, wondering whether or not to put the contract back where it was. As she decides to do this, the sound of voices from the patio reaches her. She peeks out into the living room and sees her mother and Aunt Julia in apparently confidential conversation in the patio, their backs toward the outer doors of the *comedorito*.

What are they discussing so secretively? Was this why her mother was so careful to close the bedroom door? Lira intends to find out.

Putting the contract under the pillow, she goes through the bathroom to her own bedroom, and out the outside door to the driveway. At rear a high stucco fence, latticed and covered with sweet peas, separates the driveway from the patio.

Assiduously gathering sweet peas, Lira hears her mother and aunt at leisure.

"But are you sure she *will* forget him, Maria? You know, Lira's quite a bit like her father—when he got anything into his head——"

"Certainly she will. I'll make it my business to see that she does. Haven't I managed pretty well so far?"

"But you can't stop them from writing."

"I don't want to. It will be a safety valve for her. But, believe me, if I hadn't fixed it with Zerensky to stop that leave of absence business, we'd have had trouble and plenty of it."

Lira's lips part in mute surprise. Familiar as she is with her mother's past performances, this piece of duplicity is almost hard to believe. It shows that she won't hesitate to use any means available to keep the twelve-hundred-a-week coming in.

"As long as I'm alive," the mother speaks, with grim emphasis, "she'll never marry any guy like that. She's got to stay in pictures for five years yet, and then, if she wants to throw herself away on some man, he'll have to *be* somebody. But this affair here—why, I'll wear her down to a shadow before I'll give in—I'll work

on her till she'll be *glad* to quit. See if I don't. I haven't even started yet. . . . But, of course, I don't imagine that will be necessary. I think she'll come to her senses herself after the novelty wears off. The poor dear—she's an artist, and artists are only children. How she needs the guiding hand of a strong mother! . . . Lucky she wasn't *your* child, Julia."

Lira feels a lump rise in her throat. For an instant it seems to be anguish, but then she realizes it is joy. She steals back along the wall and into the house, her heart thumping.

John is wakened by the lusty hollering of a small boy in the auto-cabin next to his as an irate parent increases the hullabaloo with a few well-aimed socks. The yelling subsided, a pleasant sound ripples through the open window of the two-dollar shack. An early robin is announcing a sunny April morning in Idaho.

A wave of loneliness envelops him as he becomes conscious of his surroundings, then, remembering that this is not Fillmore, Utah, but Pocatello, Idaho, a sense of pleasure, a joyful expectancy comes over him, and without looking at his watch he swings himself out of his bunk. It is only after he is rinsed in icy water that he thinks to consult the time. Four-fifty A. M.—probably three hours or more before the post office opens.

Packing his extra blankets and looking over the car kills half an hour, but it is apparent to him that he must

eat at least two orders of ham and eggs if this suspense is to be survived. That, with the local morning paper, should bring him to around seven o'clock.

However, he miscalculates by half an hour, finding himself fed and idle about six-thirty.

A cheering idea hits him: why not locate the post office, then stop in at some hotel and write another letter, leaving it unsealed so he can add a paragraph after receiving hers?

He pays the bill at the auto camp and drives leisurely along a residential street toward the business district, watching for some pedestrian who may be able to give him his directions.

A man in black trousers and white shirt is raking the yard in front of his cottage, which adjoins a small brick church building. John pulls up at the curb and, as the man turns to him, recognizes the ministerial garb.

"Good-morning, sir. . . . Do you mind telling me what street the post office is on?"

"Certainly. . . . You go right down here to the second boulevard stop, and it's in the first block on your left."

"Thank you. . . . Smells like spring this morning, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I think it's going to be a very pleasant day."

John leaves his car in front of the post office, rather than bother parking it a second time, and walks to a

hotel in the next block. There he buys a chocolate bar, a habit formed in France, and settles down to write a letter.

"Dear Lira:

"*It would be easy to go much stronger than this, but something must be left between the lines. The best part of my letters, I guess, will always be there. It isn't possible to add anything with words to the days and hours we had together. . . .*"

He writes in this vein for half an hour, puts the pages aside, and writes for another half hour in more intimate phrases, then tears the latter up and goes back to the "Dear Lira."

As it is now seven-thirty, however, he thinks he had better wander over to the post office and perhaps write some more there while waiting for the wicket to open.

He passes his parked car, with a glance at the rear tires, and is approaching the post-office entrance when he hears his name called, in a woman's voice:

"John!"

She jumps out of the Dodge, as he turns, and runs to him. John's posture is that of a sleep-walker, but at last he is able to speak her name.

"Lira . . . !"

"I'm going with you," she says breathlessly, without preliminary. "I flew here and landed at four o'clock this morning—I called at all the hotels, but couldn't

locate you—then I thought you hadn't gotten in yet—until I came to the post office and saw your car. I knew you'd be calling here *some* time to-day, and I was going to stand right in there and wait all day if I had to!"

She is as excited as a schoolgirl playing truant.

"Let's go somewhere and talk," he suggests, starting back to the car with her.

"I'm hungry," she says, "but I can't eat till you promise I can come with you."

The look is so beseeching he can do nothing with it. Her hand is clinging to his. "Why, sweet," he says, "of course you can—if you're just bound and determined to!"

"You're a darling!" she cries, and, oblivious of a couple of pedestrians, hugs him where he stands.

"But what on earth has happened, Lira?"

"Everything. . . . I found that Zerensky and Mother had double-crossed me—signed me up for two years instead of one—and were planning on breaking us up in any underhanded way they could. I don't believe they'd have stopped at anything. They'd have started getting right in touch with you—and what they wouldn't have tried to make you believe about me—I just got panicky and lit out—and here I am. I brought only five hundred dollars—I thought you'd let me have *that* much—the rest I left to Mother, and the house and the whole shootin'-match. Jack is shipping the Marmon to Red Deer."

"No wonder you put yourself over in pictures, honey . . . you sure get what you go after, don't you?"

"*Do* I?"

He stands looking at her in a sort of trance. Rubbing a hand over his eyes, he blinks and says:

"Is it or isn't it?"

"What?"

"Real."

He feeds her ham and eggs, but his own capacity is limited to toast and tea, although he does pick a piece of fat off her plate and eat that.

"So you're really determined to do it, are you, Lira?"

"There's only one thing on this earth that can stop me now."

"What's that?"

"You. . . . And you won't, will you?"

"I don't think I could now—you've got me too far gone."

Lira giggles, choking on a last swallow of coffee, and he has to pound her back.

"And, John," she says, "we'll be married here—this morning."

He almost forgets to close his mouth.

"Want to—really?"

"*Want* to? I'm *going* to."

". . . That's odd. . . . I stopped this morning to ask

a man where the post office was—and he turned out to be a minister."

"That's a good omen. . . . Lead me to him, big boy—and to the Western Union."

"Western Union?"

"Yes—I'm going to telegraph the news to all the Los Angeles papers. One last convulsion for Louie Zeepunksky."

"But, honey—" he looks even more sober as still other considerations occur to him— "if I coaxed hard, would you—reconsider the telegraphing?"

"Why, dear?"

"Well—some day, you know, you might want to make one more picture, perhaps. If you got real homesick up my way—or something. And if you slapped a producer openly, like this, they might all remember it against you."

"John, don't you worry about me ever wanting to go back to it. But, of course, if you'd rather I wouldn't do this, why, I won't."

"I really think it would be better to notify only your mother, giving her the particulars, and letting her act as she pleases; and as for Zerensky, I'd simply write him from Canada and let him know why you broke your contract. If he has any sense or any sporting blood he'll blame himself more than you."

"He has neither, John—but I guess you're right. . . . Here—pay the check with this, won't you?"

She tosses him a check on the Bank of Montreal for $330, payable to the Reagan Airport, Los Angeles.

"Why, Lira—where did you get this?"

"Did you think I was going to let you pay for that?. . . No—our first honeymoon was on me, John—now it's *your* turn and what a long one it's going to be."

John folds the check carefully and puts it in his wallet.

"This goes into a savings account for you," he asserts. As he tucks it in the wallet he finds the note Mrs. Griffith slipped into his hand the morning before he left.

"Look, Lira. I was saving this—your mother put it in my pocket as I got out of the Pierce-Arrow the other morning."

Lira glances at the note.

"'I'm counting on you to help me,'" she repeats, with a dry smile. "What more could she ask of a son-in-law?"

". . . And you, Lira Griffith, do you take this man, John Massey, to be your lawful wedded husband?"

"I do."

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I pronounce you man and wife."

John slips the old-fashioned, plain gold ring on her finger—a ten-dollar purchase at the Pocatello Jewelry

Store, where they also obtained the marriage license—and kisses her.

"May I?" smiles the Reverend Philip Anschutz, a former U. S. Army chaplain.

"You may," says Lira.

"I didn't think," says John, grasping the reverend's hand in farewell, "when I asked you the way this morning that you'd be doing this for me."

"For *us*," Lira corrects.

"God bless you," returns Anschutz, adding, "—and something tells me he will."

"I hope he *did* show you the way, John."

"Us," John retaliates.

They stand beside the Dodge, which is loaded now also with baggage from a local airport.

"There rides our ship," says John. "Are you prepared to go aboard, Mrs. Massey?"

> "*Yes, husband dear, to sail with you*
> *Is something I have longed to do!*"

Not to be outdone, he replies:

> "*Then let us trim our ragged sail,*
> *My darling wife, and hit the trail.*"

Laughingly they jump into the car, wave good-bye to the parson, and are off toward the north.

★ ★ ★

This first day on the open road with him, through country that seems to her more raw and wild than the Wyoming or the Montana she remembers, along rivers and over timbered passes buoyantly awake to the April sun, is one of perfect hours to be recorded in her book of days.

They speak of what is left behind, but the words drift out among the voices of spring around them and are lost. She asks him to tell her of the country ahead, then leads him astray with her eyes, until he tells only about her.

For the first time in her life she spends a night at a two-dollar auto camp, because she found out he did that in Pocatello; and the freedom of this method of travel delights her so much she persuades him to avoid hotels during the rest of the journey.

One thing she discovers, but does not mention to him, is that the little towns, and even the smaller cities, depress her. She wonders why this is. The open country is different—it makes her feel free and jubilant. When they find an acceptable auto camp away off by itself, so much the better.

At Great Falls, Montana, John suggests a hotel and a picture show, but Lira votes against the show and goes to bed at eight o'clock. They are on their way again at daylight.

When they are within a few miles of the border John reminds her that she is about to become "a subject of King George."

"I've nothing against George," she says, "but honest, I love Sam."

Once on Canadian soil, however, she insists on getting out of the car and doing what she calls "a dance of deliverance."

Now they head through the "Mormon country" into the land of the winds.

The chinook voices disturb her rest at Lethbridge, and she dozes off next day when the road is smooth, waking now and then with a start, and a slight sense of isolation, which John's smile quickly dispels.

"The Prince of Wales has a ranch near the next town," John tells her. "Would you like to go out of our way and see it?"

"No, dear, I can think of only one thing—that log house on the Red Deer River."

"I do hope you won't find it too lonesome. If I can only get you over the first few months . . ."

"You mustn't be afraid, and then I won't," she says, pressing closer to him in subconscious retreat from the endless, lonely song of the chinooks.

Andy MacKenzie taps the glowing circle of tobacco deeper into the bowl of his pipe as he gazes dreamily out of the window at the softly falling snow. His Scottish wife, Annie, an amiable, romantic woman of fifty, is washing a pan of dishes in an enormous home-made sink behind him.

"They'll be gettin' here in a snowstorm after all," Andy observes. "I tho't that one two weeks ago'd be the last, with a chinook followin' it up so soon."

"Look at the fireplace again, Andy—she'll be cold—it's an hour or more since he phoned from town."

He obediently disappears into the living room, returning immediately, however, with the news that he sees them coming. Annie throws her apron over the dishpan and follows him into the living room.

"I'm dyin' for a peek at her," she says excitedly, drawing the curtains apart a few inches.

"She's a beauty, all right," Andy exclaims.

"She is that. . . . Look at the furs. I wonder if John bought them for her?"

"Prob'ly did—if he seen where the Winnipeg papers called him a millionaire! . . ."

Annie throws open the front door, and the homecomers bounce in, in a flurry of snow.

"Honey," says John, short of breath, "this is Annie—my housekeeper. . . . Annie, this is Lira."

Lira accepts the motherly kiss with a friendly smile, and the housekeeper joins forces with John in hurrying her to the fireplace, where Andy, to cover his bashfulness, is piling wood on a fire already crackling and roaring.

"I'm not very cold, really," Lira protests.

"You've got to be," says John, "otherwise the home-

coming scene isn't dramatic enough. . . . Andy, meet Mrs. John Massey, of Hollywood and Alberta."

Andy offers a gigantic hand and grins:

"Welcome to the north pole, Mrs. Massey."

"It isn't always this bad in April," his wife adds.

"I like it," Lira declares, turning from the fire as John removes her sealskin coat, and surveying the enormous L-shaped living room, with its cedar walls and timbered ceiling.

"Oh, John—isn't this gorgeous! No, it isn't, either—it's magnificent."

"Do you like it, really?"

"*Do* I? How could I help it?"

She must see the three bedrooms, then, and the long kitchen and the pantry.

"We have no dining room," John points out, "— the magazines say they're out of date."

Lira laughs, and taking Annie's arm affectionately says: "Isn't he a nice boy?"

"*We* think so," Annie agrees.

"You see, we eat at this end of the room, when we're really hungry, or when friends stop in on us, But other times we prefer the kitchen—I like it because you can smell the apples there."

"Apples?"

"Yes . . . in the cellar . . . look."

He steps out to the kitchen and lifts a trapdoor in the floor. Lira looks down and sees barrels of apples, Ben

Davises, northern spies, and russets, and a row of smoked hams hanging from the floor joist. A large turkey, its white skin clear of every pin-feather, keeps the hams company.

"Yummy!" Lira exclaims, "I don't blame you."

"There," says Annie, "you went and found my turkey—I was going to surprise you."

"Well, Annie, you can do that with one of your deep dish apple pies."

"She's done it already," Andy chuckles, starting out to unpack the car.

Lira astounds Andy by lunching only on raw carrots, apples, and whole milk, and worries Annie by coaxing John to ride over the ranch with her on horseback, although the snow is still falling.

"I should have gone back to town to see about some hay," John declares, as they pass a herd of steers, pawing in the snow. But Lira is so highly entertained by the individual bovines that she doesn't hear him.

"Don't they remind you for all the world," she declares, "of a crowd of people staring at a celebrity!"

"They never do that," John prevaricates. "They realize that here at last is somebody of real importance."

"Oh—you. . . . Look at that one, John—isn't his expression perfectly killing!"

"If you can stand *this* dreary sight, Lira, you'll think the place is a paradise in another month or two."

"Oh, there's the river," she cries. "Is your land on the other side of it too?"

"A little of it."

"... I like the housekeeper and her husband. He has such kind blue eyes and looks so rugged and self-reliant. When Mrs. MacKenzie kissed me she made me feel like her own daughter—it seemed so loving and natural, somehow. ... Do you think they're going to like me?"

"Well—they've always been normal up to now."

She reaches for his hand.

"Old farmer John," she chuckles; "wherever he goes I'm going—every day—he won't be able to move without falling over me."

John looks slightly troubled, but his reply is indirect.

"I guess I'll have to run in to Red Deer about feed to-morrow."

"Anything you say, sweet. Don't let *me* stop you—because I'll be right with you."

Smiling at John over the carcass of a depleted turkey, Lira starts to remark that never has she eaten such and so much of a dinner when the telephone rings, and she forgets what she was about to say.

"That's a queer sensation," she declares. "For an instant I was back in Beverly Hills."

"That's Bill Johnson's call," Andy observes, and John explains: "We're on a party line here."

"Does it seem ages to *you* since we heard a phone ring, John?"

"I don't know, dear—maybe you're a bit tired, are you? Let's go and sit beside the fire."

Andy brings them the Winnipeg papers, and Lira is quick to see her mother's hand in a news item about a screen star and a millionaire Canadian stockman and wheat grower from Alberta.

John reads again the telegram that was waiting for her at the Red Deer post office:

"I gave your story to the press as I thought best Stop I know you won't stay long on any farm Stop It will be romantic at first but you will come back and producers are better to believe what I told them Stop They'll want you all the more Stop Wire when you get this.

"MOTHER."

"I'm so sorry about that, John. I don't see why she had to humiliate you. Maybe she didn't think of that angle, but it was just like poor Mother, wasn't it?"

"Pshaw! I don't care about the humiliation part of it—the sensible folks will charge it all up against the newspapers. Poor old Hollywood will probably get its share of the blame, too."

"I believe you kind of *like* Hollywood, John?"

"I met *you* there . . . don't you remember?" . . .

The fire logs burn lower, with less flare but greater warmth—like tired lovers drawing closer together.

"I didn't know it, John, until now . . . but I *was* a little bit lonesome, I guess, before we got here. . . ."

"And you're sure you never will be again?"

"I wish we could just sit here . . . like this . . . forever. . . ."

The business trip to Red Deer, which he failed ingloriously to make alone, has results which John clearly anticipated. The local editor corners Lira in a restaurant, one of the town ministers traces her to a hotel, to invite her to his church, and two prominent women leaders of the local social life seize her in the Dodge. In addition to this she is stared at by all the children, including those over thirty, and offered a pass to the leading movie theater any time she will favor them with her presence.

It is her first intimation that the great free expanse she dreamed of up here is perhaps just another little round sphere, after all, similar in shape to the restricted, buzzing little world from which she so recently made her escape.

"When we do come to see a picture," John remarks, as they drive out along muddy, slushy streets, "they sure won't know about it."

"I don't believe I'll ever want to come, John."

He receives this news in silence, and remembering how she dodged a show in Great Falls, believes he begins to understand. Perhaps when she gets rooted here . . .

but will she? . . . Down in his heart John admits he is skeptical, if not convinced.

"What sort of card games do you care for, honey?" he asks, with a certain cheerfulness, as one of the hind wheels hits the axle in a slush hole.

"I've played a little bridge, but I don't like cards."

"The townswomen will probably bother you at first, but don't let them. We'll take a run up to Edmonton or down to Calgary any time you like—it doesn't cost much."

It isn't the first time he has used the word "cost" since they left Pocatello, but on this muddy road, and with the recent village encounters fresh in her mind, it now takes on a new meaning.

"I guess you *do* have to figure the cost of things, don't you, John?"

"Yes. This more or less primitive civilization of ours up here doesn't run much to million-dollar banks—much less to billion-dollar Banks of America. The old earth gives it to us a bit stingily, all right."

He wants to say that this is what he had in mind when she first offered so whole-heartedly to give up her career, but then he realizes that a reminder is unnecessary. She will soon see everything for herself—it had to be this way—and then—he would rather not think too far ahead. Up to now, he has done what was laid out for him to do, and there has been more happiness, if some anxiety, in it, than in all the rest of his life before. He

feels that he may well leave what is coming to the days ahead.

"I wish the sun would come out, don't you?"

"I wasn't thinking of the sun. . . . I'm afraid California has had its effect on you, John?"

"Maybe you're right. . . . Are you warm?"

"Yes, thanks."

A Ford touring car, wobbly and weather-beaten, approaches along the road ahead. As it comes closer, the driver, an Englishman with false teeth, two of which are missing, puts on his brakes and raises an arm as a signal for John to stop.

"He was in my battalion," John explains, slowing down. "He milks cows for a dairy near town. . . . Hello, Tom."

"Well . . . well . . . John . . . I 'eard about you and your new missus."

Tom jumps out, taking no notice of the mud, and comes over to the Dodge with outstretched hand and a one-sided grin directed obliquely toward Lira.

"Mr. Hare, let me introduce my wife."

Tom touches his cap, Cockney-fashion, but also wants to shake hands.

"Welcome to the Red River," he greets her, disappointing Lira by omitting "me lady." "Down't jedge us by this bloody weather, though—it ayen't always like this, eh, John?"

"No. . . . Well . . . regards to the family, Tom." John

pulls slowly ahead in low, the old soldier hanging on for some yards, however, and shouting after them for a considerable distance.

"Everybody sort of sticks to you, John—including me."

"It's a big lonesome world, isn't it? People just have to crowd around something they like. You mustn't mind them too much up here, honey."

"I won't mind them . . . you know, I rather liked . . . all these people to-day . . . even this Tom . . . as you would an audience, maybe. I couldn't imagine you and me spending an evening with them . . . or an hour."

He was going to ask her about their social life while she is here. . . . While she is here . . . He discovers that the words phrased themselves in his subconsicous mind. But he won't ask her now. Lira must lead the way, from here on, and he will follow—if he can. . . .

Succeeding days are not so disquieting as that second day. The sun comes out, the west wind blows again, more gently now, and the snow melts away. She rides where he rides, renaming the leader of the dairy herd and giving comedy titles to some of the more whimsical individuals among the range steers. The wheat granary delights her, until Andy spoils her fun somewhat with market quotations, and she visualizes John sweating through a whole August day earning twenty dollars or less for himself.

John knows the neighbors are gossiping about the way he keeps her to himself and laughing at him for dragging her everywhere with him, but he worries less than ever he did about people's opinions; indeed, he has a sense of detachment from the neighborhood which he never felt before, even after a vacation in Calgary or Vancouver.

A warm Saturday evening in June. John is away to town with Andy. Lira felt a slight dizziness after lunch, and Annie persuaded her to stay home.

It is after nine and still daylight. The warm breath of the Pacific sighs dreamily though the Rockies, perfumed with a hundred miles of prairie flowers.

Lira wanders to the front gate and stands looking down the graveled road, on either side of which stretch boundless fields of grain, just heading out. John says the season is backward and that harvest will be late.

Must those little green stalks of grass grow waist-high and turn into yellow heads of wheat before he can cut and sell them? How long a time that is going to be. . . . She has been here two months now . . . only eight weeks. . . . Lira can't believe it. . . . There must be more minutes in the hours up here . . . or is it because the daylight lasts into the night? . . . He used to speak of this in California. There the sun dropped down out of sight to make way for the swift-moving night. . . .

She walks down the road, wishing he would come.

This is the first time he has gone to town without her. . . . He has left her alone now and then for a few hours during the day when the cattle got away somewhere, but she has always been with him in the evening. . . . These long, long evenings—even at first they made her feel strange and lost. Now they frighten her. . . .

Lira clenches her hands and talks to herself firmly. After the harvest, early in the winter, they'll be back in California, and what a surprise she has for Hollywood. . . . When the loveliest month in the year is so lonely here, what must the winter months be? . . . Do Alberta women have babies then too? . . .

A little brown thrush sings his evening song from a near-by fence post. . . . Afraid John will come along and catch her crying, she hurries back to the house and turns on the radio. Annie said, when the radio first came, that now this was just the same as living in Moose Jaw. . . To Lira, the voice of Graham MacNamee or a Strauss waltz from Walter Damrosch's orchestra, only emphasizes the contrasts she has been struggling to ignore The radio, like the thrush, only makes her want to cry, and she *mustn't* let John see her cry any more. . . .

She goes out to the road again, and defying the thrush walks briskly for a while. But this tires her, and she rests on a culvert, listening to the ripple of water underneath. She wonders if John ever sat here thinking of the girl he fell in love with on the screen. He did fall in love —she has had proof of that every hour since they met.

. . . John is intelligent and not ignorant of the world . . . he realized what a difference there was in their lives . . . he couldn't walk along this road without realizing it . . . . What faith he must have had in life to go and search for her. How well she knows now why he wanted her first to come and see the ranch before marrying him. . . . What faith he must still have to be so cheerful and courageous, in the face of what she has already seen, and of what she has felt, that lies within him unseen. . . .

Distant headlights startle her from these thoughts, and she runs back to the house to get her powder puff and make a better "entrance."

"I've a pair of letters for you!" he sings out, jumping from the car and meeting her at the gate. "One's from your mother. And here's a bunch of fan magazines—I had the druggist order some he doesn't carry, from Edmonton."

"Oh, honey—this one's from Jack! Come on in and let's read it. . . . I can't wait." . . .

They sit on a heavy rustic settee, which she had John make out of slabs, from a picture in the *Delineator*, a delco electric light fitted into an old lantern hanging above them. He reads over her shoulder a minute, but his view is suddenly cut off when she whirls round and, excitedly seizes him by the neck.

"Did you read that, John?"

"Why—I was about to——"

She holds the letter so close to his eyes that he can see nothing, but as she reads it to him anyway, he offers no interruption.

"'*Winnie Sheehan says to tell you Fox will take you up, husband or no husband, any time within a year. He thinks you gave Zerensky what he damn well deserved, and he wants you to write him. Sheehan says you're in a class by yourself, so don't blame John and me for applesaucing you. Better write him a note and tell him how many years he has to wait. By the way, can you tell me the difference between a steer and a steerling? Wire, if any, and save a major situation in my new collaborator's best story.*'"

"Oh, John—just think—they want me back—they haven't forgotten me! Winnie Sheehan—just like an Irishman to back me up in that. And I always did like the Fox lot. W. U. R. loaned me to them two or three times—and they treated me great. They had some real people over there."

She stops abruptly, conscious of John's unspoken reaction. It seems to her that his hand vibrated a little as it closed over her own.

"Makes you happy, doesn't it?" he smiles unconvincingly.

"Oh," she breathes, ". . . dearest . . . you don't think I'd . . . *do* it? Not—soon? . . . But they'll wait a year, Jack says. . . . We'll be down there long before a year . . . all three of us."

He studies her face a moment, until she is no longer able to play the part.

"You're unhappy, honey." He holds her against his shoulders. "You can't fool me . . . I see right through little girls."

When he soldiers like this it is hardest of all for her to control herself.

"Please don't talk for a minute," she cries softly.

Sunday morning. A few gray-and-gold clouds floating high over the poplar grove by the river. John lifts her off her cow pony, and they rest on a willow brush heap against a sunny rail fence.

"No . . ." she says, "I want to stay here with you, until winter. Now that I know I *can* go back, I may not want to so badly. Of course, if *you* could come . . . But I know how impossible that is—so I won't try to coax you."

"If only land were selling as it did just after the war. I'd pull up stakes right now and go with you, dear—anywhere . . . anywhere you'd be happy. . . . You can't *give* land away now. . ."

"I know, dear—I've learned a lot up here. . . . I know more about what it means to really *earn* a living—to get it out of the earth. . . . And you were going to spend all that money on our honeymoon flight!"

A little soldiering now on her own side—but she isn't altogether fooling John.

"I guess your mother thinks I was a pretty bad piece of luck for her. Do you suppose she really is under the weather?"

"Just nerves. I wrote her the big news this morning—it may take her mind off herself a little. She should *want* me to be in the country after that. I don't know whether she will or not. Poor Mother! She's been so indulged the past few years."

"Did you try again to persuade her to come and see us?"

"I asked her. But she won't come. She figures I'll give up first. She thinks the country will—finally get on my nerves."

Lira breaks a willow stick with a snap.

"John—what would you say to a show to-night? The paper says there's a Freddie March and Colbert picture."

He brightens at once. "Would you really like to?"

"Wouldn't you?"

He tones himself down as he replies:

"Why—uh—sure—if *you* want to."

Lira rests her head on his lap and looks up into his face.

"Solid as a rock," she says musingly. "Solid and level old John. . . . You knew I'd some day go back; yet you knew I needed you, so you took me . . . and now you'd do without me months before it's necessary. . . . Don't you ever think of yourself?"

"Say—if you had only come to Pocatello for another good-bye kiss, I'd now be a kidnaper. Up to that point, I'd done all my stuff."

"Liar . . . you'll *never* do all your stuff. . . . I know. And you'll never tell me how much you've missed the movies since we were married, either—or how selfish I've been—and spoiled."

"You're right," he teases. "I never will."

"I'll write Winfield Sheehan a polite little note this afternoon, and then we'll dress all up to-night and give Red Deer a shock, eh what?"

"Righto. . . . What will you tell Sheehan?"

"To hold his horses—that I've horses now of my own."

The letter to the Fox executive out of the way, and several hours of a Sunday afternoon still to put in, Lira picks up one of the fan magazines and looks at it.

Since coming here she has read very little of this fodder, for the same reason that she has seen no movies. John has bought them for her each month, believing that she gets diversion from them, and she hasn't told him otherwise.

Now she glances at the picture of a new M. G. M. discovery, and another of Lasky's. Girls from high school, young, beautiful, and talented—eager to jump into any breach left by temperamental or unlucky stars —hoping for the chance to demonstrate that they have

something the fickle public wants more than it wants the now too familiar smiles of the girls passing out.

Lira studies the two discoveries. One has fiery red hair and seductive eyes of deep blue and is only eighteen. Already she has had offers from New York legitimate producers, but Clarence Brown says the stage has nothing to teach her. "She is so poised, so natural," he is quoted as saying, "so unconscious of the microphone or camera, she makes no effort whatever to 'act,' satisfied with being a vivid, a different personality—her own—in every test she has been given. The making of a great star," he prophesies.

A little farther down in the story Lira reads:

> "Fox, it is rumored, have offered to buy her contract from M. G. M. at a dizzy figure, but Mayer is sitting tight in the belief that he has a real discovery."

Lira closes the magazine and, lighting a cigarette, moves about the big deserted room restlessly. How quickly things happen in Hollywood! What a short time two months is there—what an age here! Here, nothing happens quickly—except being forgotten!

Andy is heard snoring in the kitchen. Annie has gone to visit a neighbor. John said he'd be back in a little while but didn't mention where he was going.

Lira wanders to the front door and calls him, but

receives no answer, except from the hired man, who comes to life in the kitchen.

"Eh?" says Andy sleepily. "Somebody callin'?"

"Do you know where John is?" she asks, through the kitchen door, watching a Maltese cat stretch at Andy's feet.

"I seen him awhile ago, sittin' beside the new hay we bought." . . .

As she comes around a corner of the barn, Lira catches sight of him, sitting against the haystack, his head in his hands. . . .

This is a John Massey she has never before seen, and the sight touches her. She knows he is there alone because of her—trying to let her go, trying to keep her here.

She backs away so that he won't see her, and sitting down against the warm stable walls, communes with herself. John fights for her—she must fight for him. She must overcome this homesickness, this fear and unrest, and try to make the summer happy for him. She doesn't need the Marmon—she will sell it and put the money in the bank for him. Maybe this fall farm land will be in demand again.

The smell of distant rain is carried to her on a gust of wind that picks up the straw and chaff in a miniature tornado and makes the rooster cluck to his wives in

alarm. Perhaps the crops will be exceptionally good this summer—and maybe the market will pick up.

She determines to stick, no matter how hard it is, and help John through. . . .

When it comes time to dress for town, Lira confides to him that she doesn't feel like giving Red Deer a shock after all, but would prefer to wear a simple outfit.

"Are you sure you want to go, dear?" he asks, solicitously.

"Oh, yes," she tells him, with surprisingly little force.

So they go.

The car parked, and as they approach the theater, Lira feels her heart beating, but although she grits her teeth the effect on her breathing is negligible. "You'd think I was going to my first première," she says to herself impatiently.

The cashier holds a hand over John's dollar while she calls back into the small lobby of the movie house. A moment later the manager comes out and with a politeness which Lira hadn't previously noticed, asks John and his wife if they won't be his guests for the evening, adding: "We won't capitalize on it, Mrs. Massey, I promise you."

"Thank you," says Lira, smiling. "Your customers wouldn't notice me, anyway, with Claudette Colbert on the screen."

"If the news gets out, they may make us both wrong," the manager returns happily.

"Is this the same man we talked to a couple of months ago, John?" she asks as they go in.

"Yes. Why?"

"He seems different." . . .

As the news reel comes on and the house fills up Lira hears a boy behind her say: "There she is, Mother." The mother whispers: "Go and phone Aunt Hetty and tell her to come." Another woman's voice says: "The news soon spread, didn't it? I bet there won't be anybody at church to-night."

Lira feels her ears burn and wonders why she is not only unresentful but rather thrilled. When John, secretly alarmed, presses her hand and glances at her uneasily, she wants to snicker.

But when the feature gets under way she loses consciousness of her surroundings and is carried away. Claudette isn't playing opposite Freddie March—*she* is. She feels every scene, every line, her hands automatically inventing business. The lights burn against her cheeks, the voices of the sound men, of the cameraman and the director ring in her ears. "Light 'em up! . . . Quiet! . . . Play to Miss Morgan on this scene, Monte. . . . All right. . . . Interlock! . . . Speed! . . . Camera! . . . Cut!" Then the spontaneous burst of applause from the company.

"Are you too warm?" John whispers. "Your hands are wet."

Lira comes back to reality, then feels suddenly faint as a sharp pain shoots through her abdomen. But she refuses to think anything is wrong, and as the pain does not recur, insists she is all right. A draught, as some one props open an exit, gives her more confidence, and she makes herself sit through the remainder of the picture as a spectator instead of a performer.

A moment before the feature ends the manager comes to the stage and raises his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . I wish to ask a favor of you. . . . We have in the audience, as I discover most of you already have found out, a famous screen star—now the wife of a popular young rancher—John Massey." He is drowned in applause which he finally subdues with many gestures. "I want to say that if you'll promise not to crowd the aisles, or otherwise inconvenience our distinguished guest, I'll show her to you on the screen. . . . As it happens, the trailer for our next picture, opening to-morrow night, shows Miss Morgan among the other stars."

There is a hush as the Carthay Circle Theater lobby comes on the screen—Freeman Lang and his mike. . . .

"It's the Garbo première!" Lira whispers excitedly.

"Look . . . there's *you!* . . . you're grand on celluloid, John!"

"There she comes," says the manager's voice.

Lira walks to the microphone and promises the world that some day she is going to make a good picture. . . .

John is sleeping so peacefully, she mustn't waken him. Little chills pass through her, and the pains are more frequent in the small of her back. But it's only the excitement of the evening—if she lies still it may all go away. . . .

Freddie was great to-night . . . so was Claudette. . . . They are of the younger crowd, from the legitimate. They always wanted Lira Morgan at their parties, although she isn't of the theater. . . . So did the older crowd. . . . An informal reception Fred Niblo and Enid Bennett gave for Lois Wilson—she can see the guests coming in. . . . Ralph Forbes and Ruth Chatterton. . . . Dick and Jessica Barthelmess. . . . Corinne Griffith and Walter Morosco. . . . Irene Rich and David Blankenhorn. . . . Dolores del Rio. . . . The Marquis de la Falaise. . . . Connie and Joan Bennett. . . . Con and Mrs. Nagel. . . . Lois telling everybody about sister Diane's baby. . . . Diane herself and George Fitzmaurice, the baby's dad . . . and the Wagners, Rob and Florence . . . Rob the inaccessible imp of Hollywood journalism, the daddy, mother, and nurse of screen writers, artist, critic, and friend of little dogs. . . . Would Red Deer be surprised to know what they did and said? . . . No . . . but Red Deer might be disappointed . . . because the Red Deer people go Hollywood sometimes, and some-

times the Hollywood people go Red Deer. . . . There is no difference between them—except that here the day is endless, while there it dissolves quickly into other days. . . . Of course, they talk about themselves a little when they get excited . . . but Annie and Andy do that . . . and Annie and Andy never *get* excited. . . .

Fred March the night *The Royal Family* opened at the Belasco . . . what a joy that was! . . . He did his stuff afterwards at Fay Wray's house—showed us how he bowed his legs à la Barrymore. Florence Eldredge admired him with the rest of us. . . . Colbert was there—and Norman Foster, Nancy Carroll, John Saunders, and Bill Powell. Gregory Gaye brought Lester Lonergan along—a Rembrandt of the stage, to put us picture-faces on the alert. He gathered us around him like children and told us of his forty years in the theater. . . . Children . . . who get homesick . . . a few of them until their hearts break and they give up living.

How could she ever have thought she disliked them? . . . She loves them. . . . If any one of them—one she knew the least—could only stop in here to-night—now—looking for the road . . .

How could she ever have thought she hated Hollywood? . . . It wasn't Hollywood. . . . Didn't she see the real Hollywood often enough to know? . . . The Studio Club birthday dinner, for instance, before John came. . . . The long narrow tables encircled with attractive girls from every state in the union, strings of pearls

dotted with stars—Irene Rich at one end of the string and Louise Dresser at the other. Alec Francis, the Gleasons, Jimmy, Lucille, and Russell; Mrs. Cecil De Mille, Betty Bronson, Marjorie Williams the president of the club, and of course Irene and Louise among the half-minute speakers, response to whose remarks demonstrated how normal Hollywood could laugh. Irene, as thrilled as when she got her first part, telling Mayme Peake how happy she is to be Will Rogers's "wife" once more for his forthcoming production. And, later, in the delightful auditorium, listening to Virginia Sale and Vivian Knight do impersonations, and visiting, and eating the enormous birthday cake . . . the place echoing to laughter from all quarters as the girls related their experiences in studios trying to get out, and out of studios trying to get in . . . no one taking it too seriously, but everybody having fun and looking lovely . . . little of the church-social or boosters-meeting atmosphere, but a fellowship born of the love of beauty, art, and a sense of humor. . . .

It couldn't have been Hollywood she hated . . . it was the hunger of singleness . . . the yoke of conventionality, powerful too in Red Deer. . . .

The boys and girls . . . do they often speak of her? Do any of them envy her a romance they have adapted to their own lives? . . .

John thought they all seemed restless, as though looking for something they couldn't find. Just like these

people who sat with eager eyes and ears in the theater to-night and watched her on the street as if they wanted to follow her. . . . Her heart goes out to them. She knows she would waste away, as in a prison, if she had to live among them, but she feels a fellowship with them and wants to be understood by them. . . . She shivers as she recalls a dreary corner of the little town. Perhaps—perhaps some corner in Hollywood would affect John like that.

"Poor dear," she murmurs, picturing him as he looked beside the haystack, with head bent, "I could never ask you to do it . . . because I know now how it feels. . . ."

She clenches her hands as another pain grips her back and shoots through her body. The perspiration comes out on her; then she feels cold. Should she wake John? It must only be a fit of nerves. . . . She must try to sleep. John would be all broken up if anything happened now. . . . What would the crowd say if she showed them a beautiful baby and told them it was hers?

She fights the cramps which begin to follow the backache, hoping and praying for sleep. The wind outside is blowing up a rain, which threatened early this morning and again at noon. It sets her nerves on edge. "Damn such a windy wilderness!" she cries silently.

She hangs onto the sheets, her breath quickening, her eyes wet. She's letting him down—he had his heart set on this. Why isn't she like these ranch women? What's

the matter with her and all the girls she knows? Aren't there to be any more children? . . .

"John!" she cries involuntarily, unable to endure it any longer. "John . . . I'm sick. . . ."

He wakes up with a start.

"What's the matter, dear? You're trembling."

Her face is fiery red, her breathing rapid.

"Oh—I'm—in pain—John. What can we do? . . . Call Annie."

Annie comes running in. "Is it cramps, John? . . . Oh, run put on the kettle. . . . No—I'll have Andy do that—you hold her hands a minute and talk to her."

The flush passes as quickly as it came and leaves her face white. Her voice has a hysterical note.

"Squeeze tight, John. . . . I don't want to faint. . . ."

"No, darling—I won't let you faint."

"Oh—I'm no good to you. . . . I'll always disappoint you like this!"

The rattle of a wood stove is heard in the kitchen as Annie gives her husband further orders.

John holds her tightly against him and says: "Now, sweet, everything's all right. Whatever happens—about this—is for the best. I'll send you back to Hollywood as soon as Annie lets you out of bed."

"I won't go—I can't leave you—oh, I've been such a miserable failure. . . ."

Her voice rises. He is frightened.

"No—not alone, honey—you didn't imagine I'd let

you go alone? I'll go with you. Do you think I'd ever stay here without you?"

"I couldn't," she sobs. "You'd be too lonely there. . . . Oh, why is it so lonely everywhere! . . ."

"Please, dear," he coaxes, "for my sake."

Annie comes in with hot tea and a pan of hot water. Andy is heard phoning for the doctor.

"Hold her feet in this, John. I'll try to give her some tea. The doctor will be here inside of an hour."

John turns white as Lira sinks back on the pillow.

"Annie," he says, "is there any danger?"

"No, dear, she'll be all right—it isn't often serious at two months."

Mid-July. Early morning in the hayfield. She is perched on top of a load, driving the team while Andy pitches and John loads. She knows John could just as well load and drive, too, but she wants to be where she can talk to him.

It is agreed that she is to go back late in August, and he is to follow in November. During the two weeks she lay in bed he convinced her that he hankered a little after the southland himself.

It is only five weeks now until they part, and she is thankful at last for the long days and evenings. Her letter to Fox brought a night letter in return. She tried to make it a leisurely negotiation, but studio executives are poor correspondents. Once he found her nibbling,

Sheehan exerted pressure, not forgetting to mention a new silver-blonde from St. Paul whom he intended to groom if Lira found it impossible to go back by autumn, at latest. Private information from Jack established the blonde as something more than a myth, and in another week a starring contract was mailed to Lira Morgan in care of John Massey, at Red Deer, Alberta. It contained one clause Jack had urged her to insist upon, even at a sacrifice of figures: that she be allowed to pass on her stories. Sheehan put the clause in, dickering her down to fifteen hundred a week the first year, two thousand the second, and twenty-five hundred the third. . . .

Two of the neighboring ranchers have hay loaders, but John is working with six men and three hay racks. Under her wide straw hat Lira's brows are puckered as she thinks how she'd like to buy him a loader. It would save him three weeks of this labor and sweat, and what if he didn't ever use it again?—it only costs a few hundred dollars—he could give it to Andy this fall. . . . Of course she knows how impossible it is for her to suggest any such thing to John. He won't ever use any of her money. What is she going to do with him in Hollywood? What if he should lose his fine spirit and, holding his fate against her, some day drift from her?

She turns and looks at him anxiously, to be sure he hasn't done it already.

"Well, teamster," he smiles, "where are most of the thistles this morning?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she smiles back.

A neighbor's boy, running toward them from the house, waves a letter over his head.

"Johnsons must have been in for the mail," Andy observes.

"I hope it isn't a telegram," Lira says, frowning.

"It's a telegram," the boy shouts gleefully.

She asks John to open it.

"From your auntie," says John, with a troubled face. "Your mother's sick, dear."

Lira reads the message with anxiety.

"*Lira honey your mother is very ill and is asking for you Stop I wanted to spare you the worry but doctor says you should be notified Stop If you can possibly come do so and wire at once if you can as the news may help her.*

"AUNT JULIA."

"What am I to do, John?"

His face seems to harden and his eyes to soften.

"I guess you'll have to go, dear. . . . It's tough, but there's no other way."

The baggage checked—two trunks and two suitcases, one of which contains a make-up box—and as a crowd has begun to gather at the depot, Lira suggests that they get in the Dodge and hide somewhere until train time.

"These people," she says, "will think I'm another wet season if they watch this scene."

They find a friendly spot beside a grain elevator, and John holds her hands.

"Give your mother my love," he says thoughtfully, "and try to make her understand."

"She may get well, John, but she'll never understand. No one—much less Mother—ever could."

"It *has* been—wonderful . . . it still is . . . always will be."

"Oh, John, are you sure—I mean—of yourself?"

He smiles calmly and holds her cheek against his a moment.

"Of course I am. Now, buck up—it won't be such a very long time till we see each other again."

"*Why* can't you come as far as Calgary? *Please* do."

"It would make me just two days later getting to Hollywood in the fall—and it's going to be harder to wait two days on that end than on this."

She sees it is useless to coax, so remains silent.

"John. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Keep the money when you sell the Marmon, and let me return the rest you've given me, won't you?"

"Why, dear?"

"Because money is so useful to you and so useless to me."

"You'll learn to make it useful, honey—I know you will. . . . No, I'll ship you the Marmon . . . and when your mother recovers, keep the bucket of water handy

and manage your own bank account. But please don't worry about me—you know how I feel about that. I may not have many opportunities, after to-day, of giving you the usual proof of a man's devotion."

She fails in a reply to this, her eyes full.

"How long have we yet?" she asks, abruptly.

"Ten minutes."

"I haven't time to cry, but I've got to do it. Oh, I'm so miserable, John."

"There, now, honey, you'll be all right. . . ."

She stands on the observation platform waving to him until he is out of sight, then sits for an indefinite time with her eyes still toward the north. The sun goes down, and long fingers of fire, reaching up from the earth, play with the twilight. The same aurora borealis that flooded the sky over their camp in Utah, only brighter here and more awesome . . . like the divine fires within.

A telegram from Beverley Hills, received on the train north of Helena, assuring her that the news of her coming has already helped the patient, and requesting Lira not to fly from Butte, as intended, but to come by rail, because there has just been another aëroplane crash in the Sierras, relieves her mind somewhat regarding her mother, and brings her one warm, consoling thought:

the train via Salt Lake will touch at several points through which they came in the Dodge. . . .

At Butte she sends John a telegram as follows:

"Be in the Bell Telephone office Red Deer at seven ten Wednesday morning if possible and wait there half an hour Stop If too much trouble don't do it."

"How long do we stop here?" Lira asks the conductor busily.

"Twenty minutes."

"What time is it now please?"

"Seven-thirteen."

After a ten-minute delay she gets the call through.

". . . Hello . . . hello . . . Red Deer operator . . . just a minute . . . there you are. . . . John!—is it you? . . . Guess where I'm calling from? . . . Pocatello! . . . Oh, it's great to hear your voice. . . . We were married here. . . . Don't ever forget it, will you? . . . It seems years since I heard you talk. . . . Listen, dear—every Saturday night before the show—at six thirty—I'll call you. . . . I know you like the Saturday night show. . . . it won't be too much trouble for you, will it? . . . Expense? . . . What does that matter? . . . It won't be too much trouble for you, sure? . . . Beginning next Saturday, remember. . . . Is it lonesome without me? Awful? That's wonderful. . . . I hope you won't be able to stand it. No —I shouldn't say that, should I? . . . Tell me something.

. . . Say it again. . . . Good-bye, husband. . . . Good bye. . . ."

"All aboard!" shouts the conductor, in just as thundering a voice as in the good old pre-air days.

. . . She steps out onto the depot platform at San Bernardino for a breath of air, as I anticipate she will, and runs at me. I am here to sell her a story. I'd sell my own wife the story of my life. But of course I've been bustin' to see her, too.

"Have I changed, Jack?" she asks me hopefully.

"More beautiful than ever," I'm forced to acknowledge. "I brought you good news—your mother is out of danger."

"Oh, I'm so thankful. . . . Was she really very ill?"

"Yes, I guess she was. Nervous breakdown and all that."

"I must nurse her and try to be good to her."

"You can be good to her, but you won't have time for much nursing. Sheehan has the bandwagon waiting in L. A.——"

"But I'm not to work until September."

"Oh, yes, you are. And I've got your story. Here's a three-page outline—look it over while I pray in my seat."

There is one of those pauses which age a writer.

"Jack . . . it's my own story . . . !"

"That's why it's good."

"Oh," she says softly, "how I'd *love* to do it."

"Done!" says I, redecorating my house and trading in the old Hudson. "This back-to-nature sprint of yours is the best publicity you ever stole, and the best material *I* ever did."

The splurge at the depot, engineered by Bill McGrath, the Fox publicity man, is not easy to shake. Hunks of it, in the shape of interviewers, still stick to us as far as Western Avenue, but there we manage to escape, flying west on Wilshire.

"How does it look to you, actress?"

"It feeds a part of my soul that probably shouldn't be here."

"Happy again?"

"I could be—if John were sitting where you are."

Mrs. Griffith will always give me some of the credit for getting Lira back, so I feel safe now in going in.

It is a tearful scene, on both sides, so the less said of it the better.

"I would have died," the mother declares, "if you'd stayed away. But it was sweet of you to come."

"Is the nurse caring for you all right, Mother? Is there anything I can do?"

"I'll be all right now. You just give your time to Mr. Sheehan. He's been *so* kind to me. I'm *so* glad you got away from Zerensky—I never *could* stand that little worm."

"I'm glad you feel this way, Mother, because I know what I did was right."

"Is this boy really as fine as he seems to be?"

"He's more than that," Lira replies wistfully, her eyes resting dreamily on the ragged robin hedge, no longer in bloom. "He sent his love to you, Mother."

The patient weeps a little more at this.

"You'll bring him here, of course?—You can well afford to now."

"If he comes it will be on his own money, Mother. He never has taken a cent from me and never will."

"I'm sorry. Did I say something to hurt you?—I didn't mean to."

Lira pets the patient's hand and goes quickly to her own room. . . .

"How beautiful it is to hear that phone again," says Maria to her sister, an hour later.

"It's Mr. Sheehan himself, Maria. Hadn't I better call her?"

"Yes."

Lira puts away the letter he wrote in Pocatello and never mailed and goes to the phone.

"Hello . . . yes, it's I, at last, Mr. Sheehan. . . . Thank you for the demonstration at the depot. . . . To-night? . . . What time? . . . I suppose I could. . . . What shall I say? . . . You think so? . . . Well, in that case I'll have to do my best. . . . Oh, by the way—do you mind if

I send out a little personal message—to Canada—while I'm on the air? That's decent of you. Some change from Zerensky, eh? Well—thanks so much."

"I'm to broadcast from KFI at ten o'clock to-night," she tells her mother, pleased.

"It's so good to see you happy in your career again, Miss Morgan!"

"Mother—dear—you're soon going to be well again—and when you are, will you do something for me?"

"Just anything you ask, my dear."

"Then—just always call me Lira—and forget to mention about the career, won't you?"

"Why, certainly, Lira, if——"

"That's sweet. Now try and rest—the whirlpool is foaming for me and I must jump in."

At six-thirty she is in the office of the Southern California Telephone Company on La Brea Avenue.

". . . Red Deer operator . . . ready Los Angeles . . . here's your party." . . . "Hello," says John. . . . "This my John? . . . I'm homesick, sweet—homesick for Red Deer! . . . Give it my love to-night. . . . Oh, honey, I'm alive, but that's all. . . . Keep your eyes this way if you ever want me again." . . . "I'll be with you," says the far-off voice, "when the geese come by. Annie and Andy send regards. I reverse this call, mind you." "You do no such thing. . . . Listen, John—I'm going to broadcast over KFI at ten o'clock to-night. Go right home

after the show, and I'll say something to you." . . . "I'm not going to the show—it makes me feel too bad." . . . "Now you make *me* feel bad." . . . "I'm buying another bottle of ink to-night." . . . "If I said I loved you, could you hear me?" . . . "I could if you didn't say 'if.' I won't say good-bye. . . . I'll be there at ten—be on the settee we made." . . . "Yes, John . . . dear." . . .

. . . At KFI, just before ten, I am waiting on the sidelines when a short, blackish, satyr-like individual bursts on me from 1918 and the 62nd Infantry Band. The last time I saw him he had a mess kit full of butter he had stolen from somebody, maybe the officer of the day who previously had had him in the orderly room charged with treason in this utterance: "The army is d' bunk."

"My god, Charlie Shepherd, is it you?"

"Holy bayonets and bum tenor saxophones!" cries Shep.

"Are *you* in Hollywood too?"

"Don't I look it? Besides, who isn't?"

"*You* musical director for KFI?"

"Why not? Come in and hear me—I'm great."

"No—I'm waiting for Lira Morgan and a flock of cinemaniacs. . . . But, say, I've got an idea—you always did give me ideas."

"I must have given them to somebody—I never had any for myself."

"Shep—do something big, will you?—Can you play 'The Maple Leaf Forever'?"

"I can play any kind of a leaf," he returns insignificantly.

"Well, just before Lira talks, do that, will you? This movie crowd'll appreciate it."

"Yeh? Which one of them wrote it? . . . All right," he adds hastily, seeing me bristle, "I'll do it. . . . But why the hell did you ever let them naturalize you? You could just as well have gone a. w. o. l. with me that day in Camp Fremont. . . ."

The gang Sheehan sends for an hour's broadcast is important enough without himself and Willie Howard. Both of them are hanging onto Lira's arm as though to prevent any further flights. Someone makes it into a wisecrack.

"If ever she does it again," says Eddie Lowe, "I'll bet somebody from the ground yells 'Contract!'"

Shep is just finishing one of his favorites, the *Mignon* overture.

I have had a word aside with Sheehan.

"You next, Miss Morgan," a station continuity man announces.

"Just a minute," says Winnie to this functionary. "We've changed her entrance a little. The orchestra will play a short number while she waits at the mike—Mr. Shepherd knows about it."

"O. K., Mr. Sheehan." . . .

But my old army buddie has gone me one better. As Lira is announced and tells the citizens of the air she will speak, after an introductory musical number, the KFI ace tenor rises, with a sheet of music in his hand. The dead silence is broken by strains which take me back to the Conestoga River in Ontario, and I feel like weeping. The young Irish voice begins:

"'*In days of yore from Britain's shore*
Wolfe the dauntless hero came
And planted firm Britannia's flag
On Canada's fair domain.
Here may it wave, our boast, our pride,
And joined in love together,
The Thistle, Shamrock, Rose entwine,
The Maple Leaf forever.'"

The words do make me weep. I look over at Lira and see tears there too as she realizes what we have staged for her. The gang, far from recognizing the tune, but able to interpret the words, take it big, if silently, and Lupe Velez is nervous for fear Lira won't find her voice when she needs it.

But Lira finds it, though it wobbles a little as she says, into the microphone:

"That was played for you, John Massey, in your log house on the Red Deer River."

★ ★ ★

We break out, and it's just as well, for it gives her time to compose herself. The Dominion of Canada, God bless it, is, we feel, applauding with us.

"Dear radio audience," she proceeds, "we speak into a microphone—we, whom you are said to have invited—but as yet we don't see you. Some day the Company I am now happy to be working with, will put its people before you, and you'll see them, and they'll see you. I wish that were possible to-night."

We burst out again. "Don't stop yet, Lira!" Winnie urges.

"Sometimes I have felt that radio only emphasized the distance between city and country—but I don't feel that way to-night. I feel as though we were all gathered here in a log cabin, by a big fireplace—listening to the stories of each others' lives—and finding we were all looking for the same thing. We call it happiness. Greta Garbo says we should only whisper that word. . . . I've been told that I may mention my own marriage. But it is one of those happy things which I may only whisper. . . . And so to you, friends, I say aloud what I only whisper to Red Deer, Alberta—good-night and God bless you."

We tear off the roof. Shep has slept without a roof many a time anyway.

We toast her at the Embassy until 3 A. M.

But she smokes one cigarette and goes home without a drink.

"I'll make her the biggest name in pictures," cries Winnie, and when I say cries I mean cries.

Curtis Mick calls to me as I sit back of the cameras, doctoring a feeble scene for a decrepit short to be made on another lot.

"Hey, Jack—Sheehan wants you—in his office." . . .

Willie Howard and Ham MacFadden are there.

"We've just been talking about this boy-friend of Lira's," says Winnie, without prelude. "Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"Would you say he had anything as an actor?"

"My god, Sheehan, you wouldn't do that to Lira!"

Mac laughs and says: "My sentiments exactly."

"I was only trying to think of something that might help her. Her little broadcast the other night sort of got under my skin. The girl's in love—she'd do better work if he wasn't so far away. Isn't that right, Willie?"

"I was just thinking of Raoul and one of the discoveries blamed on him," Willie replies drily.

"Oh, hell," says Sheehan, "there isn't one heart among the three of you."

"But look, Winnie," says Mac, "is it necessary to make him an actor? Can't you find something else for

him? I imagine a hundred a week would look big to him."

"No. . . . Let's forget it."

The two directors escape with sighs of relief.

"Ah. . . . Right. . . ."

"Why not put it up to Lira?" I suggest.

"Why not?" he returns, after a pause. "I hadn't thought of that."

He tells the buzzer about it, and about a lot of other things, while we're waiting for Lira to come off the set.

"Hope we caught you between scenes, Lira—with this new salary of yours to meet."

"What are you two up to now?"

"Well, to be truthful, we were talking about you—and your husband."

Sheehan pauses. "I think you'd better tell her, Jack."

"Lira—do you suppose John would care anything about working in some department of pictures—the mechanical end, say?"

She smiles slowly, disappointedly, and shakes her head.

"That's lovely of you—both of you—but I gave up that dream long ago. You'd understand better if you saw him riding over his ranch—among his steers. He'd wither away if you shut him up on one of these sound stages. I wouldn't do that to him—ever."

"We thought if there was any way, Lira, to—get him a little closer . . ." Winnie tries again.

"I don't know how to thank you—but there's no chance. He always does things his own way—and I haven't found him to be wrong—once."

The buzzer squawks. A busy voice asks:

"Is Miss Morgan there? . . . Shall we hold the scene?"

"No," Lira tells Sheehan. "I'll go right back."

"Miss Morgan's on her way out."

He hangs up.

"Thanks so much, though," says Lira, disappearing.

"Well, that's that," says Winnie.

I am interrupted at my dinner by an excited phone message from Lira saying that John has sold the ranch and is on his way to California. This, it seems to me, should be sufficient joy in itself, but she insists that Jane and I come over and spend the evening talking about it. But Jane having promised to play an accompaniment for Alice Calhoun and Madam Zaruba at a Pasadena Playhouse musical, I run down to the Griffith hacienda alone.

We sit on the patio and read John's letter together, in silence.

DEAREST LIRA:

Your radio message is still on the air up this way. The Red Deer Commercial Club got telegrams from Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and everywhere about it. They

coaxed one of your pictures out of me, and I think if you'd have the studio send some up here it might be a good bit of advertising for you (as if you needed it).

When it struck the whole country that way you can imagine how it hit me. Andy upset a load of hay next morning, and he said it was because I built it lopsided. I don't know but what he was right.

Anyway, dear, I've come to a decision. It's no use trying to stay away up here with you gone, and as you belong to the world, as I always realized, not to a few hundred acres on the Red Deer River, and I could never let you come back, I'm going to sell out right away and look for something to do in southern California. Andy and a brother from Ontario are buying the stock and the crop and implements, and a man from Lacombe is coming to look over the land this afternoon. I may mail this letter with him.

It will be so good to be near you again, I don't care what I find to do down there so long as it keeps me and relieves you of the responsibility of a husband—which I know is more or less heavy even at this distance, and could be a damned nuisance close by.

I am writing this at noon, and as Andy wants to put me to work, I'll close now.

With best love,
JOHN.

P. S. 6 P. M. *Lira—the ranch is sold. William Fraser of Lacombe made a deposit on it this afternoon, when Andy agreed to let some of the stock go and lease the place for*

three years. I should arrive in Hollywood within ten days and with seven or eight thousand dollars. The balance will be paid to me in yearly installments of two thousand dollars. So you see I'll be able to navigate. Fraser is taking this to the post office for me. More love, J.

"Well, why aren't you dancing, Lira?"

She folds the letter and holds it on her lap, thoughtfully.

"What if he gets homesick? Homesickness is an awful thing, Jack. Isn't it queer how our hearts get tied to a certain spot on the earth? . . . I keep thinking of him as I saw him once, sitting behind the barn, by a haystack. . . . This seems such a sudden thing to do—for John."

"He's a sudden guy. He snapped *you* up quick enough, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," she admits reluctantly.

"Now, look here—you've nothing to worry about. He's young—he'll get transplanted—and he'll make friends fast. That's the great thing about California—we're all in the same boat—all from somewhere else. No matter where you come from, you'll find people from the same place. Look at me—he'll have *me*, won't he?—isn't that something? And say, Lira, I know a fellow at United Artists we've got to have him meet—another Canuck war veteran—name is Alec Dower, from Toronto. They'll have lots in common."

"You *are* a cheering soul, Jack. . . . How is it you never told me you were a Canadian until I met John?"

"Did Al, or Charlie Christie, or Walter Huston, or Walter Pigeon? . . . Be yourself, girl—we're Slavs. . . ."

Mary Brian is having a few of us over to her place to-night to celebrate the completion of a picture of hers on our lot. Carlotta and Robert Warwick Jr. have involved my wife, so I might as well go along.

"Will Lira be there?" Jane asks me.

"I don't know. If I did I couldn't tell you, because I'm too familiar with the secrets of her life already."

"Call her up and see, will you, gag man?"

Mrs. Griffith answers the phone.

"Oh, hello—are you up and around?"

"Yes, thanks. . . . That you, Jack? . . . Did you wish to speak to Miss Mor—to Lira?"

"Please. . . . Hello, Lira. . . . Are you coming to Brian's with us to-night?"

"I guess not. John wired that he'd be here in the morning. I was afraid he might arrive earlier, and I wanted to be home."

"Mary's counting on you. Better come. If John should blow in, your mother could phone you."

Jane takes the receiver from me and completes the seduction.

★ ★ ★

These homey receptions aren't always hot enough for all the boys and girls of Hollywood, just as they might feel tepid to the younger bloods of Amherst, N. S. About eleven-thirty the bolder spirits start agitating for the Russian Club, and when Lira, Jane, Mary, and her young banker-brother try to moderate, they elect themselves guardians for the party.

"Just what we need to keep us out of the caviar," Frank Albertson remarks, and a dialogue writer from North Hollywood copies the line on his paper hat.

Lira calls her mother to report our movements and promises to be home as soon as she can break away.

As we take possession of the ground floor of the Russian Club, cheated out of the upper floor by earlier birds, I notice two handsome chaps drinking at a table off in a corner, and I glance toward Lira apprehensively. But it appears that she hasn't seen them, and I observe with relief that her back is toward them as Phil Holmes seats her. . . . One of the twin diners is Tony Devereaux.

"I'd hate to run this place," says Walter Byron, drinking out of Isabel Sheridan's glass, as the pounding of heels in a Cossack dance above them threatens the ceiling joist.

"Why, Walter?"

"Such a terrific overhead."

Skeets Gallagher has been nominated toastmaster, and the waiter therefore comes to him when a telephone call interrupts the revelry.

Skeets returns to the table in a moment with a gleeful face.

"It was for you, Lira. And what do you think, gang? —it's a man, too."

"How did he know she was here?"

"It's the Maple Leaf Forever!"

"It's the mysterious Canuck!"

"It's the long-lost husband!"

". . . The radio hero!"

Confused, Lira rises and starts toward the phone, but half a dozen of the crowd jump up and beat her to it.

"Hello. . . . Say—she wants you to come up to the Russian Club——"

"Oh, please!" Lira protests to Jack Oakie, unavailingly. Others of the gang cluster around the telephone holding her back with cries of: "You've got to let us see him." "You've had him hidden long enough." "We want to give him a welcome!" and so forth, *ad lib.*

"You don't need any clothes," Oakie declares, "and you'd better hurry or you'll miss her. The address is 5525 Harold Way—just north of Sunset and west of Western—you can't miss it."

"You're up against it," I advise Lira. "Let it ride—John may get a kick out of it."

"Practical jokers!" she says under her breath, mad enough to cry.

"It'll be all right," I assure her.

"I think I'll tell Mary I'm leaving."

"You can't do that now. He's on his way here."

"Isn't that Tony Devereaux over there?" Raquel Torres asks her companion.

"Why, sure. . . . Hey—Tony! Come on over here. Bring your friend."

Lira looks at me in alarm. I signal her to sit tight.

"Do you mind?" Raquel asks the hostess, making a place for Devereaux.

"Of course not," Mary replies unenthusiastically.

I am just as uneasy as Lira when I discover that Devereaux is about half drunk.

"How are the foreign versions, Tony?"

"What language are you making love in this week?"

He makes no reply, but fixes his eyes on Lira.

"Hello, Lira," he says, with half-sober insolence. "Long time no see 'um. . . . This li'l' party's in *your* honor, I guess, isn' it?"

"What makes you think that?" she returns, as casually as she can, her face rather white.

"Well, I heard you all at the phone, you know. I may be in foreign perversions, but I still understand a little of the good ol' English, y'know."

I want to throw him out, but on Lira's account am afraid of his tongue.

The waiter comes over to the table and announces that someone has called for Miss Morgan. This is the cue for a general scramble, in the course of which John,

in a brown English tweed suit, is dragged in our midst. Lira manages to get his hand but isn't going to kiss him. John hears them shout for an embrace, and with "almost professional poise," as Stu Erwin remarks (being rewarded by a smile as bright as June), initiates the ordeal himself.

They plant him beside Lira, across the table from Devereaux and directly across from where I sit. It strikes me as a singular thing that so many eagerly anticipated events turn out for us like this.

"Do you know who we are?" Oakie says untruthfully. "We're the bunch that sang that maple sugar song for you over KFI a while back."

"Why," says John, with some effort, but apparently with easy grace, "and there the whole country gave credit to some tenor."

Being so far from a professional wisecrack this passes for a natural, and John is forced to accept a glass.

"Toast from the bridegroom!" Phil calls, and is backed up noisily.

John rises slowly, and looking down at Lira says:

"Here's to Lira Morgan—
She doesn't need the 'Mrs.';
I don't know how to finish,
But at least it rhymes with kisses."

He quickly kisses her on the cheek and sits down, blushing.

We all yell, and John becomes one of us. We figure we can carry him along with us now—maybe even get him feeling good enough to be a real entertainment.

But the boy proves too foxy for us—he says our liquor tastes so bad after coming thru Calgary that he can't get it down.

"Then tell us about your trip," Skeets demands. "We haven't been farther than Victorville in eight years."

John looks as though he now suspects us of spoofing him.

"With all these famous people here?" he replies.

"Now, come off that stuff, Canada!"

"We're just a dull lot," says Oakie, "and you can hardly tell one of us from the other. For instance, take Jack Gilbert, Gilbert Roland, Roland Young, and Young—Young Stribling——"

"Supposed to be entertainers—and we're the easiest people on earth to entertain. Look at some of these premières we go to."

"Is that why you call on me?" says John.

Another guileless crack that gets a hand.

"I *owe* you some amusement all right," he speaks in a natural, friendly tone. "I think I'd know nearly all of you if we met on the street—and most of you have entertained me lots of times—up where we need it pretty bad, especially in winter. I feel as though I know you all—Lira has often told me about you."

"Ever tell you about *me?*"

A chill sneaks up my back as I recognize Tony's voice. It seems threatening, full of malevolence. Lira stops breathing as our eyes come together.

John looks at the speaker with calm scrutiny.

"Oh," he says, "I remember you—you're Tony Devereaux, aren't you?"

"Right," says Tony, meeting the look doggedly.

"Well, Tony, shake hands—you're the only actor ever made me cry!"

Tony stares at him, unable to decide whether or not this is a gag. But John's long arm is stretched across the table, and the smile is friendly.

Tony hesitates a moment, then a warm flow of blood from the Latin side of him touches his brain, and he accepts the hand with a courtesy and good-breeding for which he is noted.

"How about another drink?"

"No," says John. "Thanks. But there *is* something I'd like." He turns to Mary.

"Name it, Canada," says Oakie, "you're sure among friends—even if we can't all make you cry."

"I was just wondering if you wouldn't excuse—a couple of us—from the party—and let us go home now."

There are yeas and nays. Gallagher raps the table.

"Order," he commands. "Where's your pedigrees? . . . There's a motion before the house. The newly-weds

want an immediate divorce from us, and who could blame them? . . . All in favor say 'Aye'! . . ."

"Aye!!"

"The 'Eyes' have it—and they're not cockeyed either." . . .

John unexpectedly pulls the Dodge to the curb and stops.

"I just couldn't wait another minute for that hug," he says, demonstrating why.

"I couldn't wait either," she admits. "I thought we never would get away from them."

"You know, honey, I wasn't going to bother you to-night—I thought you'd be in bed, and I was just going to drive by the house and look at it and say to myself: 'She's sleeping in there, and I'm to see her in the morning before breakfast.' But when I saw the light on, I couldn't stay out."

"Was Mother up?"

"Yes. She kissed me."

"She'll know I'm all right now that you're here. Let's not go home. Let's go to the Plaza—I want to see our names on a hotel register again. . . ."

"Are you asleep, John?"

"No, dear. . . . I thought you were."

"I feel like talking to you."

"That's how I feel."

"Are you *sure* you'll not miss the ranch too much—to stand it?"

"No. Why, dear?"

"Because, when I miss it so much myself, after living there only two months, I can imagine how terrible it must be for you."

"Do you miss it, really?"

"You'll think I'm out of my mind, but there are moments when I get so homesick for it, I don't know what to do . . . and yet I know I couldn't be happy there."

"Are you happy here?"

"Beside you—yes. I have found new interest in my work—and I've learned that it's satisfying to save money—because some day it will make us both free."

"Worrying about me again, eh? Now, don't you do that, or I'll run away on you."

"Our Red Deer River home taught me the value of money. . . . If only it were down here—within a few hours' drive."

"That would be nice—but we don't have everything in this world, honey—you know that, don't you? You and I have more than our share already."

"I don't know. . . . The doctor said no babies. . . ."

"Oh, now, honey," he coaxes, "he only said it wasn't advisable when you're under a strain. Maybe some day . . ."

"And you," she says, unconsoled, "if you should get feeling the way I did up there . . . I wish you had left

it so you could go back—I'd go too, in a minute, before I'd let you—go through that."

"You're tired, dear. You mustn't worry about these things. There's lots of land there still, if ever I did go back."

"Do you think you ever will?" she asks quickly, anxiously.

"I don't think so. . . Now, let's rub your arms and legs—you're all nervous. . . . Does that feel better?"

"But, John——"

"No—not a word, now. Daddy'll spank. The opportunity is waiting."

He thinks he has her asleep.

". . . John."

"My gosh, are you still awake?"

"I'll never be able to tell you how fine you were to-night—about Tony Devereaux."

"He's a darned sight better-looking than that little French girl was," John replies, almost gayly, if sleepily.

But it couldn't have been quite the right thing to say. It costs him another half hour of sleep.

"I'm afraid they're working you to death, sweet," he says finally. "You seem all wrought up."

"I'll go to sleep now," she promises. "Just hang onto me tight."

And to his surprise she does.

★ ★ ★

. . . Having had a glimpse of the high-strung temperament, and of the strain under which Lira must daily work, John is excessively restless during the two weeks' idleness that follows for him, and this, in turn, reacts on her.

He brings the problem to me, and I advise him to try the sound department at United Artists, where he won't hear so much about a hard-working, high-earning star-wife. With the assistance of a little drag I arrange it with U. A., and I begin to have hope at the first meeting with Alec Dower.

"John, you'd never think this domesticated studio slicker had ever found a machine gun in his stocking four Christmas Eves in succession, would you?"

"What outfit, Massey?"

"Twenty-ninth Vancouver."

"'Tobin's Tigers,' eh? Put her there, boy!"

In another moment they've forgotten I'm anywhere around.

"Where were you, Alec?"

"Queen's Own. Third Machine Gun."

"The old Second, eh? . . . Ever get lonesome for Ypres?"

"Yeh—especially that mud hole west of the salient."

John laughs. "You in that, too, eh?"

"I could tell you a lot about this boy, John," I volunteer. "Old Colonel McLaren wanted to commission him on the field, but this peaceful gunner——"

"Now that'll be all, Jack—until I call my press agent——"

"Anyway, he came back a captain like yourself."

"Well," says John, "somebody has to be 'it' in *every* game of tag."

"Yes," says Alec, "even in *der Tag*." . . .

All this, I am happy to find, interests John intensely. He is not, I also find, nearly so interested in a couple of other things: (1) the fact that Alec is Mary Pickford's first cousin—a circumstance Dower himself ignores, outside and in, and (2) the making of sound tracks and wax records in a cavern the smell of which is not reminiscent of prairie flowers.

A night in early November. A santa ana, a few weeks late, is blowing warm over the foothills. To John it must seem like a messenger from those other warm winds, the chinooks, calling him back.

He hunts me up at my house and takes me into the garden.

"Jack," he says, "I'm worried about Lira. I'm afraid they're working her too hard."

"It isn't the work that bothers her, John. It's you."

"Me?"

"She thinks you're not happy. . . . Are you?"

He gives me a look I'll remember a long time, as he replies:

"I couldn't be happy away from her."

"John, can't you think of anything you might do that you'd enjoy—and at the same time satisfy your natural ambition a little? You can't fool either her or me about this movie job, you know."

He grips my arm, but doesn't speak.

"I'd go 'way back up there for a while. I think it would even help *her*. . . . We'll get you both a vacation."

He shakes his head.

"What we find . . . must be permanent. . . . This jerking back and forth will tear us apart."

He meets my eyes and takes my hand.

"You've helped me," he says simply. "I see that I must go to Lira." . . .

He finds her alone in the patio of their rented house in Hacienda Park on the hillside, waiting for him. The colored maid has a fried chicken dinner ready, but Lira isn't hungry, and John doesn't seem to be, either.

"You look tired," she says, watching his face as she runs a hand through his hair.

"Honey—I've something to ask you—something that's hardly fair."

The old familiar fear rises in her throat, but she won't let him see her weaken.

"I know, John."

He takes her on his knee. She struggles successfully with hidden tears.

"For a month now one of the boys on the lot, a friend of Alec's, has been telling me about a place in Arizona——"

Her face lightens.

"—In what he calls the Salt River Valley—near Phoenix. He's a cowboy—wants to go back there—and wants me to go. Says we can prosper in the cattle business."

"Oh, John!"

She seizes him around the neck and kisses him so hard and so many times he finds himself dizzy.

"Why, Lira!" he says, dazedly.

"Go, dear—I want you to go. It's no distance at all. I could see you every Saturday and Sunday—it's less than three hours by air——"

"How did you know?"

"We went there on location once. It's beautiful—you'll love it. Oh, John, I was afraid you meant—back to Alberta."

"Oh, you did, did you?" He lifts her high in the air. "You know everything, but that's one thing you *didn't* know. . . . And I'll bet you can't tell me the fare on the Western Airways express, either."

"Is it terrible? Will I ever be able to afford it?"

"Twenty-five sixty."

"Oh, think of that—almost two cents on all my weekly dollars—two per cent love tax!"

★ ★ ★

. . . We ride, John and I, down a wooded coulee overlooking a wide stretch of reclaimed desert valley. Far in the background misty blue hills are donning purple and gold in the early morning sun. Innumerable squares of green alfalfa, dotted with white buildings, high-light the friendly scene.

He is showing me his range cattle, scattered in the brush pasture around us.

"Some day," he says, "I hope to own this place and some of that bottom land down there."

"It's really going to be your home, then, is it?"

"Oh, yes—I guess so."

"Don't you ever hanker after the old Red Deer River?"

"Yes—sometimes. For a month or two I thought this wasn't going to be much of a success. But I know now I'll get used to it—and in a few years you won't be able to drag me away from it."

"Good. You're getting transplanted."

"There's something about this south country that grows on you. The hills looked bare—almost ugly to me, at first. But Ned—my cowboy friend—talked so much about them, and they looked so good to him after a movie lot, that I began to notice them more. There is something about this country all right."

"Are you still just renting the place?"

"Yes. I put all my cash into stock and a little machinery. Also I had to fix the house up a little."

"Yeh—I've heard you were married."

John looks at his watch.

"Guess we'd better be getting back. It's a good hour to Phoenix—at least, the way I drive."

"Her ship doesn't arrive till nine forty-six."

"I know—but I always like to be early."

Jane decides she would rather not go with us to the airport. "I think this is mean of you and Lira," she tells me, not for the first time.

"My dear," I reply, good-naturedly if uselessly, "Lira has her own ideas about things, and on top of that probably knows John better than we do."

"Did you tell him yet about the picture?"

"No—we're going to discover it's on to-night as we drive by the Orpheum Theatre."

"I'll bet he won't feel much like going."

"There's where I come in. I have to make him."

Most of the people I know make poor dramatic material. Some of them will stand a sequence or two, others, with a superhuman effort, may hold up a situation or even sometimes a premise. John is always good for a complete story. I'd even take him on as a serial.

As we drive to town I finally succeed in eliciting an expression from him on the personal side of her career.

"Often I feel guilty for having deliberately come into her life as I did. I naturally keep comparing my own achievements to those of the many successful and even

famous men she mixes with. I envy them the privilege of being near her all the time. I even sometimes feel afraid she'll get attached to one or another of these fellows—and want to get away from me."

"This is a new side of *you*, isn't it, John?"

"Maybe you're just beginning to know me."

"I don't think so. . . . Do you know what gets you feeling this way? . . . Being alone so much. Once a week isn't often enough for people to see each other who are as much in love as you two. You ought to be able to have vacations together all the time."

"You may be right. I would if I could afford it."

I hit him now without looking at him. "John, don't ever let money drive you apart."

I drop the subject here, and he remains silent for several miles.

A high-soaring hawk appears as a speck in the western heavens, disappears, then is seen again.

"Has she ever missed the ship, John?"

"Not once."

"You'd be pretty much disappointed if she didn't come, I'll bet."

He ignores this.

"It's a queer sensation to stand here on the ground and watch someone come down to you from the clouds, Jack."

"I guess it would be. I've yet to have a visitation."

★ ★ ★

The Fokker lands, kicking up a bank of dust in which John disappears. I am conscious of Jane's scolding and have a guilty feeling as I follow him to the side of the ship, for appearance' sake.

Four passengers debark, but Lira, as I know without looking, isn't one of them.

"Didn't Miss Morgan come?" John asks the pilot incredulously.

"No, sir—not this morning. Someone from the studio canceled her reservation."

John comes back to me, the disappointing news printed on his face.

"There'll no doubt be a wire at the telegraph office," he says. "Let's go and see."

We go to the Western Union, but no telegram has come through.

"I wonder what could have happened," he speculates, worried, his face reflecting the uncertainty I observed for a few moments on the way into town. The "successful and famous men" (God pity them!) are obviously on his mind again.

I steer him past the Orpheum Theater, allowing him to discover:

LIRA MORGAN IN "DIVIDED"

"Well, look here!" he exclaims. "Lira!"

"Why, it's my own picture," I also discover enthusiastically.

"It's the first time any starring picture of hers has been in Phoenix since I came here," John declares.

"We'll have to see it to-night."

"I'll bet she'll fly in by special plane, Jack. It would be just like her."

"You ought to know her tricks by now."

Arrived back at the ranch house, he calls Western Union again, but gets no news.

"Be sure and telephone me," he instructs them, "the minute a message comes in."

But the long, drowsy afternoon brings nothing, and John scarcely touches his dinner. Jane is all the more put out because she baked a devil's-food cake. I can't remember any other such occasion when I didn't dare reach for a second piece.

Neither has he any appetite for the show—he seems definitely to want to avoid it; but seeing that it's my own picture, and not wishing to appear either indifferent or sentimental, he comes along. Jane again remains at home. . . .

I wouldn't have believed John could be so depressed. He doesn't even want to talk to me.

"This story was held up by retakes," I explain, for something to say, "on account of the death of an actor, and wasn't released until after a later one. I like this

one better than any of the others we've been working on."

Before going into the theatre he insists on walking around to the telegraph office again, but—nothing there.

"Now, don't worry, John—she probably told the switchboard girl to send a wire and Edie forgot. It happens, you know. You'll see her alight from Mars to-morrow morning sure."

This consoles him just enough to put him in a receptive mood for the picture.

"What a shame she couldn't see this with us," he says, after the opening sequence.

"Yes—it is too bad. How does it start off, to you?"

The question goes unanswered.

He sees himself and her and forgets the rest of us.

It is the story I showed her on the train from San Bernardino—their own story, concealed beneath what art a machine age and the movie-going public have made possible.

He seems miles away from any suspicion of collusion, as he follows the psychology of a highly successful woman in love with a man whose natural pride and principle won't allow her to help him. He sees her gently rebuffed, always gently but always rebuffed, until her

emotional nature begins to rebel at the denial of its greatest desire—to offer him gifts. She is tormented by doubts. Does he refuse to be put under obligation, so that he may feel free—free, some day, to leave her? If he loved as she loves, wouldn't he want to be bound to her and by her? Wouldn't he even welcome the chance to be placed in a false position before the world if it were to bring her the assurance a woman must have to be fully happy?

He sees the man hold aloof, until a coldness creeps in, and they become divided. She has offered and given him everything; he has held back. The magic circuit is broken. . . .

I glance at him again as the fadeout comes, and realize with a pride of my own that Lira and I have succeeded.

Tony Devereaux isn't the only trouper, after all, who can melt hearts of hard-maple.

"Jack," he says, gripping the steering wheel of his old Dodge and looking straight ahead of him, "I wish you'd tell me something."

"All right—if I can."

"Did Lira have anything to do with that story?"

"Sure she did. The whole thing was her idea—I merely dressed it up. Why?"

He speaks after a short pause.

"You and your wife make yourselves at home tomorrow, I'm going to catch the midnight train to Los Angeles—to-night."

But this, I feel reasonably assured, will hardly happen —unless Mrs. Griffith has found the trip too strenuous. In such an event, there will be a wire at the house, for certain.

But there is not.

There is a new Dodge truck and a Pierce-Arrow town car.

"Lira!" he cries, as she bounces out the door. "What a scare you gave me!"

"Sorry, darling," she beams.

I catch her eye and pass her the signal.

"What's this?" he demands, indicating the truck.

"Oh, I just happened to meet your landlord in town—and he said what this ranch needed most was a good truck to haul tired steers in."

John is still looking into her eyes, in a most solemn manner, when Mrs. Griffith appears, followed by the colored chauffeur, and Aunt Julia's boy, Bobby.

"Why, Mother," he says, "this *is* a pleasure."

"I'm the reason she didn't fly, dear," replies Maria, and kisses him. "And I brought Bob and want you to put him to work!"

"Yes, but who's the reason she didn't wire?"

Lira gives Jesse a secret dig with her knuckles.

"Why ah guess ah am, suh!" he apologizes. "I done cairried it too long in mah pocket."

The telephone rings.

"I'll bet that's your telegram now, John," Lira suggests. "Go and see."

She leads me in shelter of the truck as he goes into the house.

"Did it work, Jack?"

"Oh, boy . . . and how! . . . He was going after you on the night train. . . . I felt sorry for him."

"Honest? Oh, isn't it glorious? . . . I've great news for him—I can only tell him half of it to-night, though. The half I *can't* tell him just yet is that I bought this ranch to-day."

"Fine! Now I'm set for my old age." . . .

"Lira."

"Yes, John."

"Were you asleep?"

"No—not quite."

"I can't believe I'm going to have you here for two whole months."

"Can't you?"

"I can't forget you—in that picture. I almost suspect you had a hand in the story."

"Why?"

"I—I hardly know . . . it seemed to have *you* in it—your spirit."

"Yes, John."

"I—sure feel grateful to you for the truck . . . you know that, don't you?"

"You mustn't feel *too* grateful, because it's half mine."

"So it is. I was forgetting. I guess you want to go to sleep, don't you?"

"I suppose it is late."

"Good-night, dear."

"Good-night."

"Lira . . ."

"Yes, dear."

"Still awake?"

"A little."

"I just wanted to tell you—I think we'll be prosperous next year. Cattle are coming up, they say."

"I'm glad."

"My next installment from home—what would you say if I made it a payment down on this ranch?"

"I'm too sleepy to think, honey."

"Oh—I'm sorry. Good-night, dear."

"Good-night."

"John . . ."

"Yes, honey."

"Mean to say you're still not asleep?"

"Just about."

"I just remembered. A while ago you spoke of—home."

"Oh, yes . . . I got that from the Cockneys . . . they were always talking about 'ome."

"Are you sure this is home to you now?"

"Somehow, to-night it is—for the first time."

"Then I'm satisfied. . . . I'm happy, John."

"Good-night, dear."

"Good-night."

"Hear that breath of wind? . . .

. . . . . .

"The breeze is company to me. . . .

. . . . . .

"A charm about this country . . . the old Dons left some kind of spell here. . . . We come from all over the world . . . meet here, and are friends. . . . Even when we're old we long to come back, they say . . . and when we're young——

"Asleep, dearest? . . .

. . . . . .

"*Mañana* does count a lot. . . . A sweet word when you're young . . . and when you're old . . .

"A Dios!" . . .

THE END

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